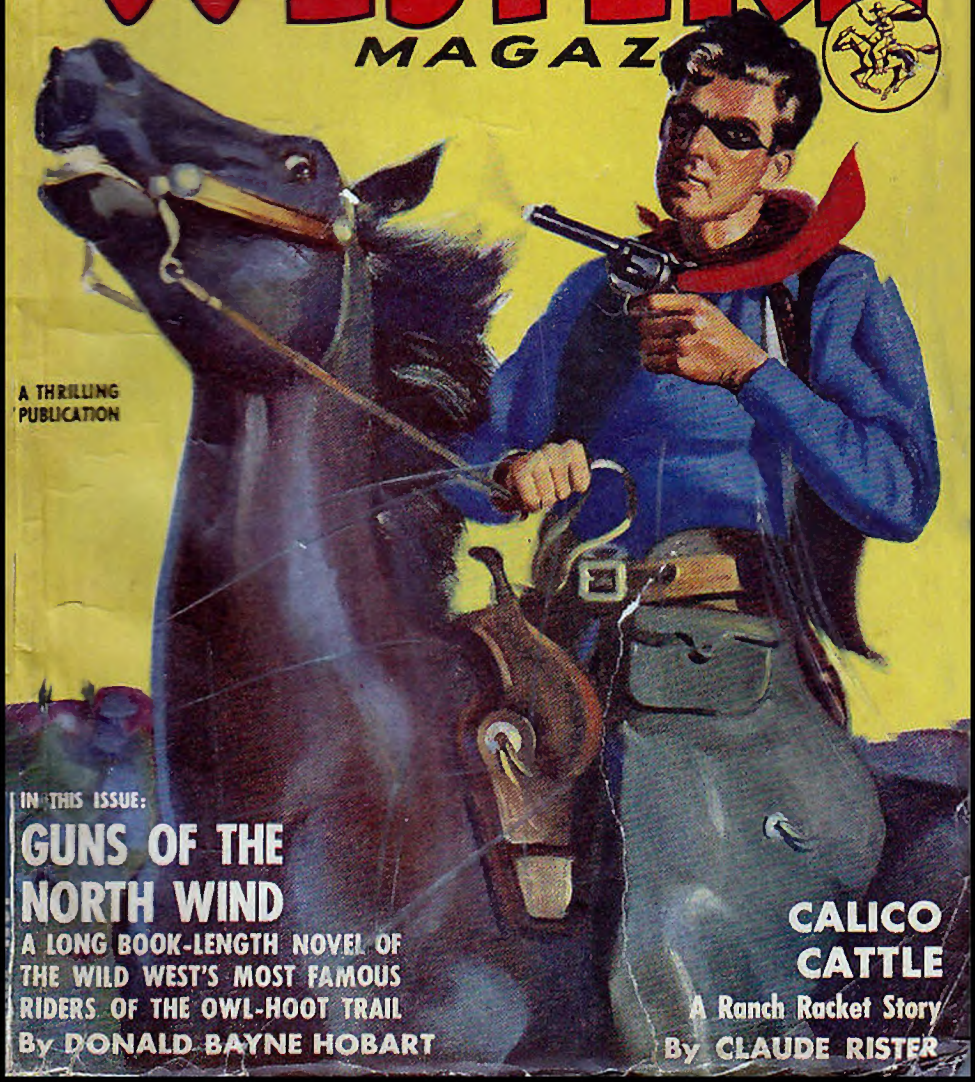
10¢

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

JAN. MAGAZ



A THRILLING PUBLICATION

IN THIS ISSUE:

GUNS OF THE NORTH WIND

A LONG BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF THE WILD WEST'S MOST FAMOUS RIDERS OF THE OWL-HOOT TRAIL

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

CALICO CATTLE

A Ranch Racket Story

By CLAUDE RISTER

Rotating Forest Fire Lamp

See the Smoke Rise and the Forest Burn!

Here is a new, unusual Bedroom or Table Lamp with ACTION! Everyone who sees it will be positively fascinated, and it will never fail to be a source of interest and amusement to your friends and your guests.

The forest fire on this lamp shade, in beautiful lithographed, brilliant colors, really seems to burn. The flames leap into the air and the dark smoke rolls across the sky. An unusual lamp that has action. It represents one of the most realistic scenes you have ever seen and it never fails to interest everybody. Just look from the burning forest fire on the background there is the beautiful lake and trees in the foreground! The automatic revolving cylinder gives the scene right after you plug it into the socket. It requires no electricity to keep it going — the revolving heat of the bulb makes it turn. A novel and beautiful mystery lamp. Colors are so realistic that it looks like an oil painting. Attractive metal top and base.

Can also be supplied with a view of Niagara Falls. In this lamp the water seems to be flowing through the rapids and racing in a whirling motion as it goes over the high falls, vanishing down at the bottom. $1.35

FOREST FIRE LAMP, Price Postpaid .....
NIAGARA FALLS LAMP, Price Postpaid $1.35

Naughty *Nudies* Glass Transfers

OUTSIDE . . . Her Charm is Modestly Concealed
INSIDE . . . She is Handsomely Revealed!

From the outside of the glass, these beautiful little lasses are shown in modest poses — but turn the glass around and lo! their costume seems to vanish, leaving them in nature's own! Fill the glass with a liquid and see becomes lively, revealing every curve. Tip try one on the windshield of your car.

Transfers are lithographed in five beautiful process colors, so that the girls look startlingly life-like and natural. They can be applied easily, in a few seconds, to any glass. Pictures are 3 in high. Set of 3 ..... 25c
Transfers, only .....
Complete Box of 8 Different Nudies Transfers 59c

3 For 25c

NUDIES GLASSES We can also supply the beautiful sparkling, crystal-like glasses with 8 different figures. Finest grade. Price Per Set of Six $1.98

SWORD & SCABBARD

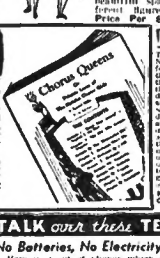
Toy metal sword with scabbard. A new and wonderful novelty. Realistic blade of shiny finish metal. Slides into metal scabbard which has metal attached. Length, 17½". Price Each 25c

WONDERFUL X-RAY 10c

Apparently See Through Flesh, Etc. GREAT CURIOSITY! With it you can apparently see the bones in the fingers, built in a pencil, work the flesh appears translucent. Really. Price Only 10c

CHORUS QUEENS or Lives of Hotcha Chorus Girls

This book reveals the intimate secrets and fascinating pastimes in the lives of famous Broadway hotcha girls. It tells you in vivid detail every move they make from the time they get up until the time they go to bed. Although there has been a lot of talk and discussion about chorus girls, few people seem to know exactly what they do. Now, for the first time a famous author takes you behind the scenes and gives you an intimate glimpse into the secrets of their lives. Get the book now—watch their step—it's going on! Price Postpaid Only 10c



Confessions of A Minister's Daughter — An interesting and fascinating book which explains the delusions and false ideas a minister's daughter or her progress through life. A few book are so interesting to read. Price 10c

Confessions of a Taxi Dancer — Explains how the Dime a Dance girls work in the dance halls, how they live and for profit. Interesting facts about these girls who dance with you for a dime, people in an evening. Price 10c

JU-JITSU CONT'D BY BUKUKO

The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with grips, throws, wrist locks, body holds, strangles, arm locks, reversing, strangling, armlocks, scissors, counters, holding, pressure, chokes, double toe throw, side arm defense, defense against knife, against two assailants, stomach throw, secret throws, secret nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with ease. Only a few cents a week. Complete in one volume 30c
New Book of 60 Tricks Of Self Defense, Only 25c

BROADCAST *thru your radio* TALK - SING - PLAY

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—insert wise cracks, josh and mystify friends. Imitate radio stars, practice speaking, singing, radio announcing, etc. Be a Bing Crosby, Charlie McCarthy, Jack Benny, Kenny Goodman, etc.

World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. Not a toy, but one you can use programs at home, parties, club affairs, etc. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

Price Only 25c

DELUXE MIKE

Large, substantial, all metal mike. Practice radio announcing, broadcasting, etc. programs, etc. Connects to radio. Reproduces voice with loud, clear tone with out distortion. Table model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed $1.00
Price Postpaid .....

BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

NEVOLVER STYLE — 50c $1.00

Fine For Protection

Well made and effective. Patented latest type of revolver. Looks and shoots like real revolver with scare-action. Uses Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. Great protection against vicious animals, dogs. Have it laying around without fear of accidents. Imitation revolvers. Fineish Blued Jolly. New, shiny finish. Length 9½ inches, etc. Two sizes. Medium Size, 50c. Large size $1.00. Blank cartridges 100, Holster (cowboy type) 60c. Shipped express collect.

REPEATING SLING SHOT

Automatic repeating slingshot that will fire 100 shots with one loading. Powerful for accuracy. Built heavy every time. Carries a long distance and is quickly and easily reloaded. Powered just like an automatic. Sturdily constructed with double rubber washed shot holder and thick lively rubber bands. Fun for all. Price 25c
200 Extra Shot 25c
Extra Rubber Bands for only 10c postpaid.

TALK *over these* TELEPHONES

No Batteries, No Electricity - Just Talk!

Here is a set of phones which carries the voice perfectly for any distance. Your 1st to 21st feet. Use them for only 10c a pair! Uses no battery or electricity—just the voice current. Connect to another, from workshop to office, etc. Each phone acts both as a receiver and speaker. Set complete with two phones, connecting cord and instructions.

A toy you can't beat! You should get a set right away and arrange telephone system between friends, your workshop and office. Send get it now. Anyone can use them. Price 10c
Deluxe Set of Telephones Only 20c

10c PAIR Complete

Boy Electrician

With 712 Illustrations for making Batteries, Dynamos, Motors, Telegraph, etc. 10c

THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE VENTRILO — A little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with ease. Anyone can use it. Never fails. A complete book with full course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. Sent Postpaid for only 10c

Climbing Glove Monkey Dummy

Stick your hand like a glove, in the back and make the hands walk up the wall. Looks real funny. Will scare you know ventriloquism! Takes a little practice. Simple, unbreakable. Price 15c

Charlie McCarthy Talks — This Talking Card is a life-like portrait of Charlie, the famous dummy. It also contains a photograph attachment. Lots of fun. Price 20c

$78 value Creation Only 25c

Seven Wonder Model 50c

MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music and Sports Everywhere You Go

This amazing midget pocket radio brings in programs from within a radius of several hundred miles. Receives stations on regular broadcast wave length under favorable conditions—in the country, at sea, camps, cities, etc. PRYWARES and EVERYWHERE. Made of special metal and strand wire, attach single or double head phones at time to suit your convenience. No batteries, no electricity, no upkeep cost. Simple instructions.

MIDGET POCKET RADIO Price $1.00

1-Tube Pocket Radio

Brings phone PIERCY FROM RADIO. Sensitive Cathedral cone. Complete in one unit with tuning coil and crystal detector. Fits in pocket. Listen anywhere with good aerial and ground. Uses ordinary batteries.
Price Postpaid $3.49

PEA-MATIC REPEATER-12 SHOT

HARMLESS ACCURATE — Shoots 15 Peas

Does it sting, boys? It doesn't! Uses ordinary peas without reloading. Just pull the trigger and keep on until the last pea is gone. Then reload and have some fun shooting them. Uses less and saves. They sell the best makes now open season. Impossible to hurt anybody. Safe and accurate. Complete with pistol, ammunition belt for Peamatic only 25c.

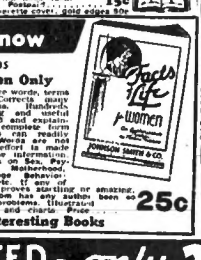
25 Cents

Pistol Cigarette Case 25c

Hands Up!

Electric Baseball & Football Games

Completely Electric - Hundreds of Scientific Plays



BASEBALL — The pitcher can pitch a "Slow Ball," "Fast Ball," "Curve Ball," "Knuckler," "Fork Ball," "Change of Pace" and "Wild" Ball, by electricity. Over 100 batting possibilities. Batter can bunt, hit, fly, single, double, triple, home run, foul, etc. Batter can be called Safe, Out, Fly, Foul, Home Run, Single, Double, Triple, Out, Strike, Ball

Be a wholesale manufacturer. Let the storekeepers sell your product. Frazier and Rarick lined up 580 dealers their first two weeks in business and had an output of 180 pounds a day.

YOU

can be one of a country-wide Chain producing Vita-Seald — the one, standard National Brand of Potato Chips, known everywhere as the most delicious of Potato Chips and at the same time, famous for its healthgiving qualities due to our unique method of extracting excess grease and retaining the 9 vital minerals so essential to good health.

I'll Start YOU in the Potato Chip Business

and show you how you can "coin money" right in your own kitchen

NOT long ago it took a lot of money to break into the Potato Chip business. Now, you can start with so small an investment you'll be surprised and "raring to go." You don't need a store or factory. Start right in your own kitchen and *grow*. My compact, efficient, Vita-Seald Machine represents years of engineering experience. This machine with its high-speed slicer and oil extractor, is all you need to turn out delicious, golden brown Vita-Seald chips which are the rage of the Century. No wonder they sell like hot cakes wherever introduced. When you get your Vita-Seald equipment, you are ready to start making money the very first day. I supply you with everything necessary including beautiful, embossed Vita-Seald trademarked bags and free advertising material. But I do not stop at that. I also furnish you a book of instructions telling exactly how to start and build a business which will produce profits to satisfy any man's ambition.

Experience Not Needed

Here's a business where selling is no problem. You don't need to create a demand for Potato Chips. Millions of pounds are sold and eaten daily. All you have to do is make the kind of chip I will show you how to make, and the orders will flock in.

This is where the Vita-Seald secret comes in. When I discovered how to make a greaseless, mineralized Potato Chip, I revolutionized the Potato Chip business and started to build a nation-wide chain of small home-factories, all making and selling the same famous Vita-Seald brand of chips. When I start you in business, I give you full rights to the use of the nationally known Vita-Seald trademark. Just think what it means to produce a famous brand of food instead of a nameless product! Already hundreds of Vita-Seald manufacturers are cleaning up big profits —but the surface is hardly scratched. There's room for thousands! It takes lots of chips to supply the appetites of America's millions!

Few people realize what a big profit margin there is in making Potato Chips. Only $2.50 invested in raw materials brings back $10.00 in cash at wholesale. Profits roll in day in and day out. There's no limit to the volume you can do nor the territory you can cover—but "start small and grow big" is my motto. Who knows but some day you may be the Potato Chip King of your state?

I'm Talking

to Men and Women who want to own a permanent business that can pay

Big Daily Profits from the Start
Without Overhead Expense

Think of it! You buy potatoes at 2c a pound and sell them as potato chips at 35c a pound

That's what I call a *business*. Just write to me and I'll give you without obligation, the amazing facts about the sweetest, soundest business proposition you ever dreamed of.

Don't Buy Anything — Just Write Me Today!

If you think you want a part in this big-profit industry, let's get down to business. I don't expect you to jump in blind. I want you to make a thorough investigation. Put it up to me to explain and prove every detail. But for heaven's sake, don't hang back through fear I'm going to ask you to put up a lot of money. You'll be astounded at the liberal proposition I have to make you. Just send me your name and address on a card and say, "Show me." I'll then give you the secret of making greaseless, mineralized Potato Chips and every bit of information I have gathered during years of experience in this line. There's no cost or obligation, yet this may prove to be the most important step you have ever taken to insure a future free from money worries. Address your letter or card personally to me:

George H. Hardt — 620 N. Michigan Ave., Dept. E-291, Chicago, Ill.

Missing Page

Masked Rider Western Magazine [v6 #1, January 1939]
(Better Publications, Inc., 10¢, 114pp, pulp)
15 · Guns of the North Wind [Wayne Morgan (The Masked Rider)] · Donald Bayne Hobart · na
97 · Growin' Pains · Tom Gunn · ss
100 · Calico Cattle · Claude Rister · ss
Trail Talk · [The Editor] · cl

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED-THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY-I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT

TOM'S RIGHT - AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST--
SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS, OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS
THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO - MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THAT'S $15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
THANKS!

I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME RADIO JOB NOW--AND A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *In Your Spare Time For A* GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for Radio than any other man in America.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to $6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—$200 to $500—for hundreds, while learning. I send you special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 method of training makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time jobs after graduation.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9A09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Broadcast Operator After Twenty Lessons

"When I had completed the first twenty lessons I had obtained my license as Radio Broadcast Operator and immediately joined the staff of WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator." —HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

$10 to $25 a Week In Spare Time

"I am making from $10 to $25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N. R. I."—WM. F. RUPP, 203 W. Front St., West Conshohocken, Pa.

$3,500 a Year In Own Business

"After completing the N. R. I. Course I became Radio Editor of the Buffalo Courier. Later I started a Radio service business of my own, and have averaged over $3,500 a year." T. J. TELAAK, 657 Broadway, Buffalo, N. Y.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9A09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio." which points out the opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

$1 BRINGS YOUR CHOICE of these Gifts

BUY NOW— get this SALAD SET FREE

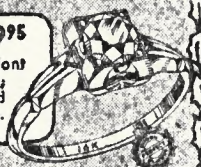
10 MONTHS TO PAY
10 DAYS FREE TRIAL
MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

FREE

This $2.95 7-Piece SILVERPLATE SALAD SET if you send $1 with order, saving us C.O.D. charges. Money back if not satisfied.

Bring Happiness this Christmas with a gift of jewelry. It's simple—here's how you do it. Put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address and the number of article wanted. Tell us your age (must be over 20) occupation, employer and a few simple facts about yourself. Information held strictly confidential—no direct inquiries made. Upon arrival of your order, we will open a 10 month Charge Account for you and send selection for approval and your free gift . . . this $2.95 7 pc. Silverplate SALAD SET. If not satisfied, return merchandise and your dollar will be refunded immediately. If satisfied, pay the balance in 10 small monthly payments. Send Coupon today.

$52.50 A351—Sworn perfect Diamond; 2 other diamonds. 14K yellow gold. Affidavit with purchase. $5.15 a month

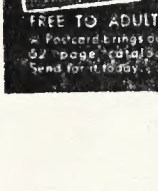


A147—Sworn perfect Diamond Feature. Brilliant perfect diamond; 14K yellow gold mounting. $50 value. **$29.95** $2.98 a month

A58—Bridal Pair—Engagement-Wedding Ring to match. 14K yellow gold. 5 diamonds in each. **$33.50** $3.25 a month

435—Massive 14K yellow gold man's initial ring. Diamond and initials on black onyx. **$19.95** $1.98 a month

$39.75 R536 — Bulova's newest feature — the Dolly Madison. Tiny watch with 21 jewel movement. Case in charm and color of natural gold. Complete in gift box. $3.88 a month



P238—Ladies' Tiny watch, 2 diamonds in newest style case—charm and color of natural gold. 7 jewels. $1.70 a month **$17.95**

P514—Small size 20 diamond watch—14K white gold—17 jewels. Worth $65. $4.65 a month **$47.50**

K57—Men's watch—newest style. Roman numerals on non-tarnishable chrome case. 7 jewels. $1.40 a month **$14.95**

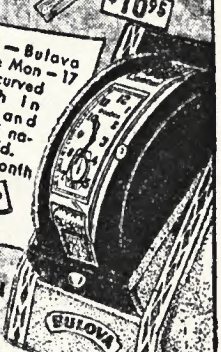
613—Benrus 17 jewel Signet Watch with initials in 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Mention initials. $2.38 a month **$24.75**

615—Ladies' Benrus Signet Watch. Small size. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Bracelet to match. 7 jewels. $2.38 a month **$24.75**

R129—Lady Bulova—a 17 jewel feature in charm and color of natural gold. $2.88 a month **$29.75**

W103 — 10K yellow gold engraved Cross with Chain. Size illustrated. $1 a month **$10.95**

M211 — Bulova Minute Man — 17 jewel curved watch in charm and color of natural gold. $3.28 a month **$35.75**



SEND COUPON WITH $1

L. W. SWEET, Dept.729A1670 Broadway, New York City

Gentlemen: Enclosed find $1 — send for approval and free trial No. with SALAD SET Free. If not satisfied, I will return articles and you will refund my dollar.

Name .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....

Send brief note with coupon giving age, occupation, employer and a few facts about yourself.

Our FREE Offer expires Jan. 30, 1939.

L. W. SWEET

FREE TO ADULTS MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS

A Postcard brings our 52 page catalog. Send for it today.

Dept. 729A 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

THIS MAN'S IDEA IS A GOD-SEND TO FOLKS WHO NEED MONEY

ALBERT MILLS

By P. H. Graham

This is a true story. I know this man personally. I know of the folks he has helped with his money-making plans. I know of widows with children to support who thank him for their cash income. I know of men who lost their jobs, but are now making more money than ever before. I can tell you of men and women who live better because of the opportunity this man gives them to add to their earnings. Yes, I know of literally hundreds of folks to whom this man's idea of doing business has been a God-send.

Do You Need Money?

Perhaps you, too, are in urgent need of money to meet pressing bills. You may have some spare time you want to turn into cash. Then you will want to write this man at once. There will be no obligation on your part. Costs you nothing. He will write and tell you about a wonderful opportunity he has for you and how others who were hard pressed have found relief with his common-sense plans.

He is President of a large, million-dollar manufacturing company. He does business in every section of the country—in your very locality. He started a few years ago with an idea. It was this: He said, "I'll help worthy people who are in need of money. My proven business building plans shall be given to the deserving so they, too, can have money." He prospered. His business became most tremendously successful. And today is still growing.

Would Earnings Up to $40 in a Week Help You?

Right now he needs 300 men and women in all parts of the country. He wants someone in your locality to handle the business there. To everyone who accepts his offer he guarantees a fair, square deal and an amazing opportunity to make money in a pleasant, dignified business. Everything you need is sent to you. You don't risk a penny of your money. He takes care of that. You don't need experience. He tells you the few things you need to do in simple, plain language. Just say you are willing to give his plan a fair trial. I'll be surprised if you don't make up to $35.00 in a week for your spare time either in the daytime or evenings. If you decide to continue with the business you can devote full or spare time the year 'round and enjoy big cash earnings. Your earnings will be in proportion to the time you can devote. I know of other people who have made anywhere from $40.00 to $100.00 in a week.

Your Earnings Can Start at Once

I sincerely ask you to fill out and mail the coupon. You don't obligate yourself or risk any money. You will receive complete details by mail. Then you can decide if you want to start right away and have the money you need coming in at once. It will certainly pay you to give this offer a trial. Better sit down and write your name and address on the coupon or a penny postcard and mail to this man at once. Just address Albert Mills, 9211 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio, and say, "Send me your free proposition."

ALBERT MILLS, President
9211 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Yes, I want to make money. Without cost or obligation, send me full details of the wonderful opportunity now open in my locality.

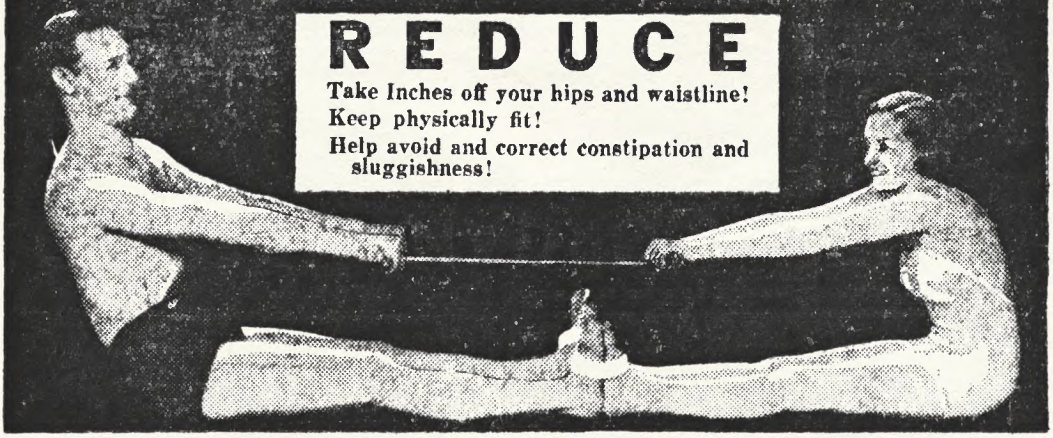
NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

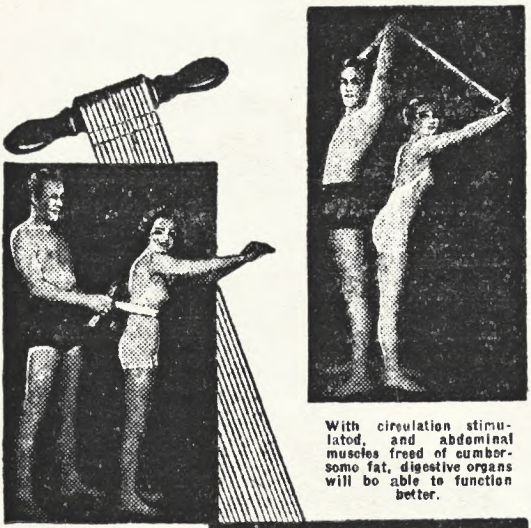
COMPANION EXERCISER



REDUCE

Take Inches off your hips and waistline!
Keep physically fit!
Help avoid and correct constipation and sluggishness!

Exercise is FUN if you do it, the Companion Way!



With circulation stimulated, and abdominal muscles freed of cumbersome fat, digestive organs will be able to function better.

Lots of fun and wonderful for reducing waist and hips!

The Bonomo
COMPANION EXERCISER
distributed by
BLEIER & BROWN
1270 Sixth Avenue,
Radio City, New York, N. Y.

ONLY $1.00 WITH EXERCISE AND HEALTH CHARTS

It isn't "work" when you exercise with your room-mate, your girl friend or your wife! Here's a simple, new exerciser designed by the famous physical culturist, Joe Bonomo, that incorporates the best features of the rowing machine and the pulley weights. It combines fun and exercise because it is made for two people to use at the same time. TWO people benefit from its stretching, limbering, strengthening assistance.

Only 10 minutes a day!

It takes but little time and will help to keep you feeling "fit as a fiddle." Watch the energy, pep and vitality come back. Watch the new sparkle in your eyes, the fresh color in your cheeks. By the end of a week you will count those ten minutes a day as time well spent.

Marvelous for Constipation!

With the "Companion" exerciser you will get just the waistline "toning up" that is needed to keep your digestive organs functioning properly. Help your system to free itself from toxic poisons! Relax your tense nerves and muscles! Start to really "live"!

FREE! If you order at once we will include, FREE of extra charge, special Exercise chart giving full instructions; also a large, illustrated Health chart. Shows you what foods to eat . . . what to do to get more out of life. Contains 12 rules for health and a perfect figure.

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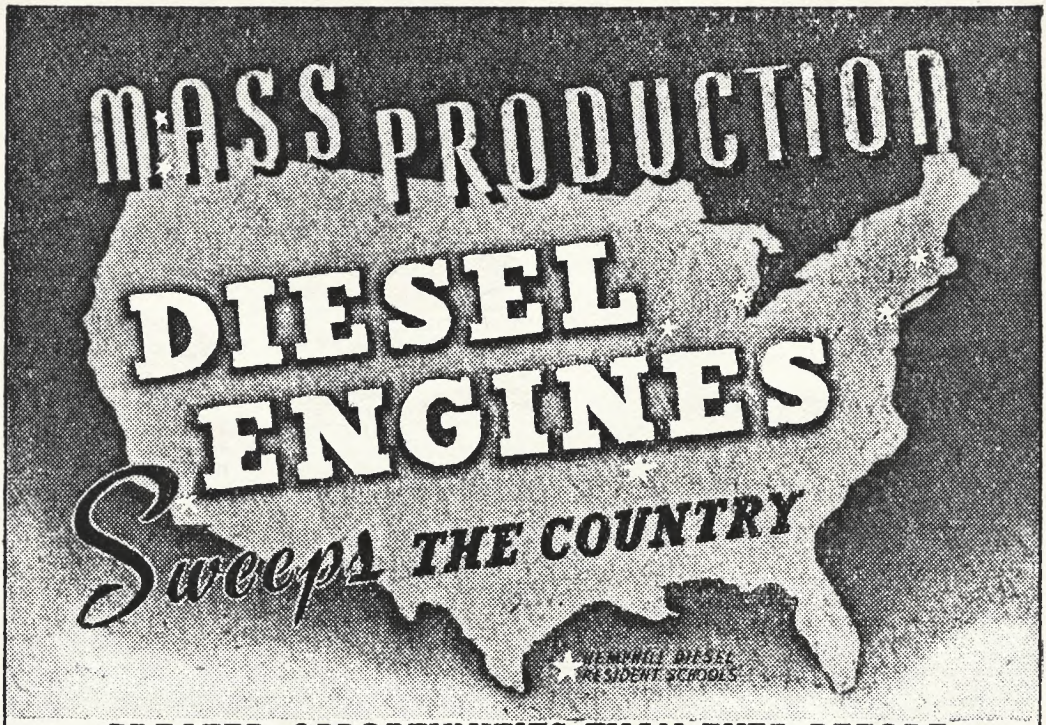

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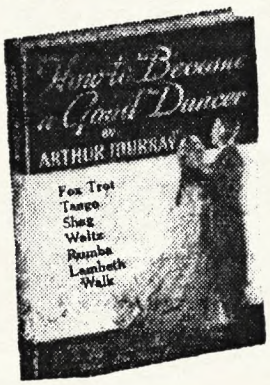

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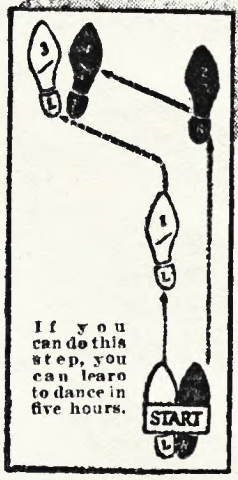

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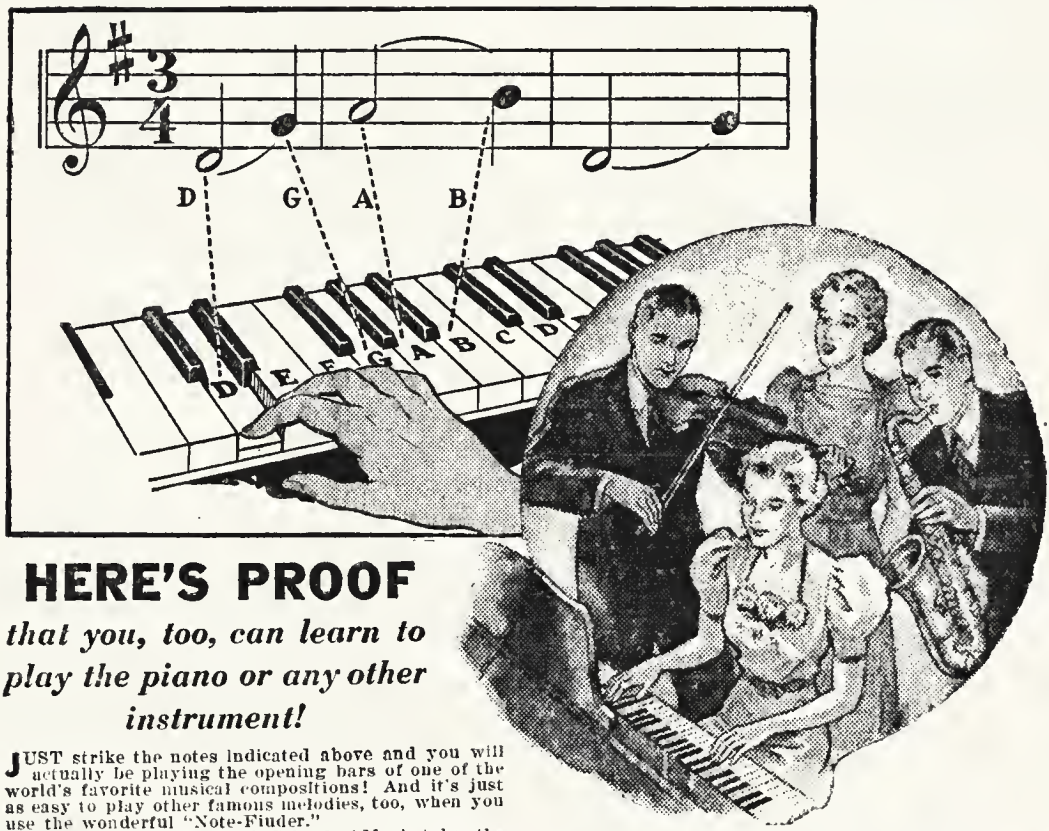

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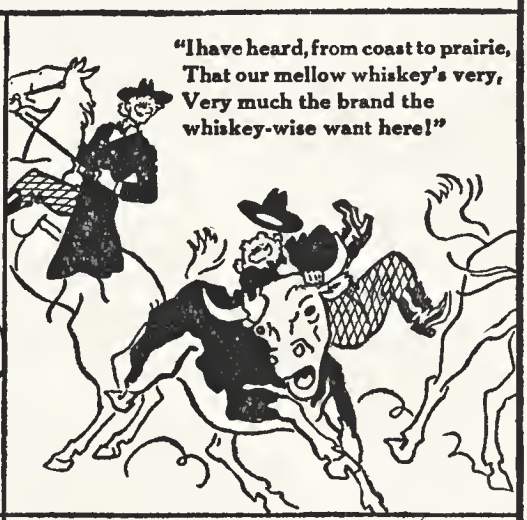

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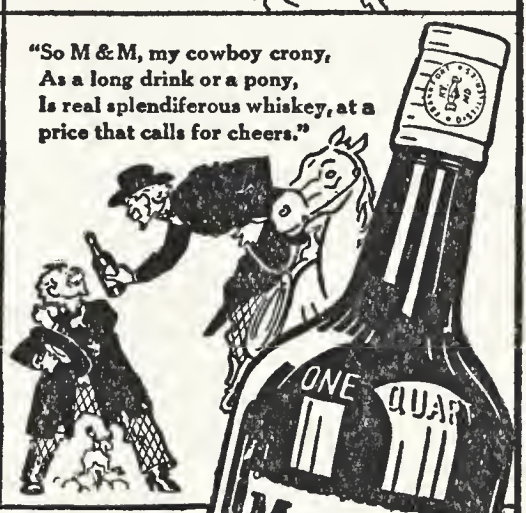

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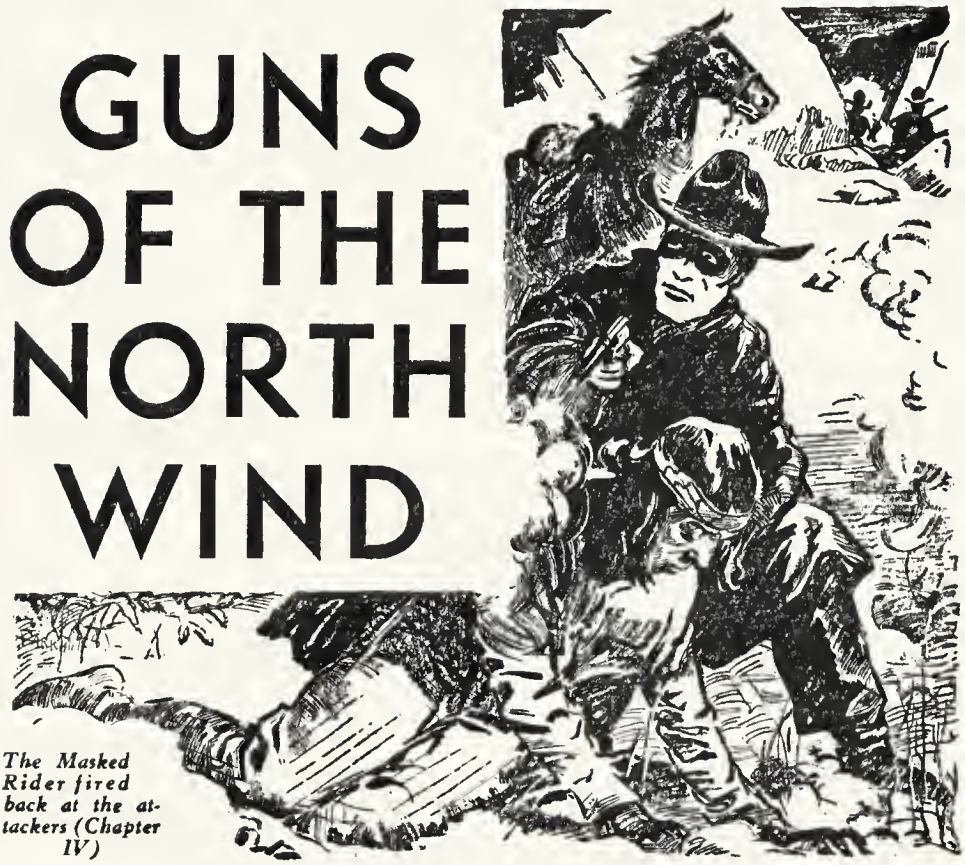
Vol. 6, No. 1 MASKED RIDER WESTERN MAGAZINE January, 1939

GUNS OF THE NORTH WIND



The Masked Rider fired back at the attackers (Chapter IV)

The Robin Hood Outlaw Braves Storm-Swept Range in His Relentless Ride for Justice!

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Six-Gun Combine," "Gallows Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I

Ordered to Go

"DON'T look back, Annie!" The gaunt man on the covered wagon seat stared straight in front of him, facing the bitter wind with squinting lids. The woman beside him, dry of eye, but with a bleak misery etching deeper the lines of her wrinkled face, paid no heed to the mumbled words.

She leaned far out to her left, trying to peer past the flapping canvas, the bunglesome overhang of odds and ends of old furniture lashed along the footboards of the wagon. The wind

A BOOK-LENGTH MASKED RIDER NOVEL

whipped her gray hair and sent stringy strands, wet with melting snowflakes, straggling across her tired face.

Overhead the sky was a vast, leaden arch with darker masses of clouds limping across its inner curve like weary ghosts who can know no rest. The gray land, blotched with icy white where the wind-driven snow had drifted, stretched on and on into the limitless north. The wagon was a crawling blot with that tired, endless northland unrolling before the creaking wheels.

"Don't look back, Annie!"

"Sam, I got to. It was our home, where our babies were born and died, where the best years of our lives were spent, where we worked and strove and suffered for—nothing!"

The core of utter bitterness was contained in that last hopeless word—bitterness and dumb suffering that could never be articulate. The gaunt man felt it, and his gnarled hands tightened on the reins until the bony knuckles whitened under their tan. For an instant his steady gaze wavered, the dry eyes filmed. Then he spat over the near wheel, straightened his sagging shoulders and resolutely faced the north.

Another of the dry-gulchers

"Ain't no use of lookin' back," he said in the same monotonous voice. "Nothin' we can do. We got to look ahead now."

But the woman was still staring into the past, which lived for her south of that shifting white curtain. Her eyes

sought to pierce the thickly falling snow, her voice took on the soft croon of retrospect.

"Come spring and our flock's been bigger'n stronger'n it was last year," she said, speaking to herself rather than to the man on the seat beside her. "We had one of the nicest sheep ranches on t'other side of the river. Sam, you sure you read right what was writ on that paper the sheriff brought?"

went down (Chapter XIX)

The man spoke, in a weary sing-song voice, evidently repeating words burned on his very brain:

"Jest this, Annie. 'Notice, to whom it may concern: All owners of both sheep and cattle ranches within two hundred miles of the Big Hills Valley are hereby ordered to abandon their property at once.'"

The old woman voiced the hopeless groping of tired defeat for hope that cannot exist.

"You sure it said sheep ranches, too, Sam? Maybe it just said cattle ranches."

"It said both, Annie," the man replied with weary impatience. "There jest wasn't nothin' we could do but pack up our things as best we could and git."

Silence followed, broken only by the mournful creak of the wheels, the muffled jangle of harness iron, the dull chuck of shod hoofs. Overhead the sky darkened, the wind wailed a harsher note. The gray north grew more lowering. The snow curtain pressed closer. Tired, lonely, drably

hopeless, the covered wagon lurched onward toward that forbidding land beyond the unseen horizon.

At length the old woman spoke again, like a child requesting the repeating of a many-times-told tale.

"That order telling us to abandon our property at once was signed by the United States Government, Sam? Why'd the Government do that? Why'd they make us get out before spring come? Why couldn't they let us stay long 'nough to shear our sheep?"

"Don't rightly know." The rancher shook his head. "Sheriff Alton said somethin' about condemning property, and land grants and all such-like. I didn't understand him any too good. Know he paid me five cents on the dollar for our ranch, and it was just robbery, that's what it was—robbery! Had to throw in the sheep, too, 'cause there were no chance of them living if we drove them north in this kind of weather."

The couple lapsed into silence as the wagon rolled slowly on through the snow. There was a bitter hopelessness in their muteness. They realized they were too old to start all over again.

"If there was only some way we could have kept the ranch," sighed the woman finally. "Just some way!"

"Ain't no good talkin' about it, Annie."

They had not traveled more than another mile when a horseman loomed out of the storm in front of them. The woman uttered a startled little cry as she saw the tall, black-clad figure on the big black stallion.

The horseman held up his hand in a signal for them to halt and as he rode closer they saw that a black mask hid the upper part of his face. There was snow on the brim of his big black sombrero and on the shoulders of the dark cloak that he wore.

"Holdup!" muttered the rancher. "Ain't it enough that we had to give up our ranch without being robbed of what little money we still got!" Despair was in his voice.

"Where yuh headin'?" asked the masked man as he rode closer and halted his horse beside the wagon. "This ain't no fit weather for old folks like you to be travelin' in."

"He don't talk like he wants to rob us, Sam," whispered the woman. "His voice is sort of kind-like."

But the man in black heard her. His ears were quick.

"I shore ain't aimin' to rob you folks," he said reassuringly. "Seen yore wagon, and wondered who would be out in a storm like this one. What's wrong? Yuh both look like yuh've lost everythin' in the world."

"We have!" the old sheep rancher said mournfully. "Everythin'."

"Won't do no harm to tell him about it, Sam," whimpered the woman. "He acts friendly, even if he is wearing that mask."

"Shore," urged the masked man. "Tell me—I'm a heap interested."

LIKE two children confiding in an older person the old couple told the horseman their story. They told of their sheep ranch and five others like it that had received Government orders to abandon their property.

The lean, strong jaw of the masked man hardened as he listened, and the keen blue eyes that gazed through the holes in the mask became steely.

The rancher and his wife talked on, their simple words, the hopelessness in their voices painting a vivid picture of two ruined lives, of losing everything that had been dear to them when it was too late for them to start over again and build anew.

"And yuh say the cattlemen in the Big Hills country have got the same orders?" the masked man asked seriously, when their story was finished.

"Yes, but I heard tell they refuse to leave," answered the old man. "But they got big outfits, and are a heap better able to fight somethin' like this than we sheepmen are."

"There been any trouble between the sheep and cattlemen?" asked the

black-clad man.

"Not up to now." The sheep rancher shook his head. "Course the sheep and cattlemen ain't been right friendly, but it's sheep country on one side of the river and cattle on the other, so there ain't been much trouble so far. Could be though if somebody was to start it."

"What's yore name?" asked the horseman.

"Sam White," the old man answered simply. "And this is my wife, Annie."

"Turn yore wagon around!" commanded the black-clad man. "Yuh're headin' back to yore sheep ranch, and yuh're gonna stay there!"

The old couple sat gazing at him in dazed wonder, unconscious of the biting cold and the steadily falling snow.

"Who are you?" asked Annie White finally.

"Folks call me the Masked Rider," answered the man in black.

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed old Sam White. "The Robin Hood outlaw what helps folks that needs him!" He looked at his wife, as though not daring to hope, and yet anxious to obey the command of the man in black. "He told us to head back home, Annie."

"Of course he did!" In the woman was a sudden show of spirit. "What are you waiting for, Sam White? Get that team turned around—we're going home again!"

"But the Government and the sheriff—" protested her husband, "they give orders for us to leave!"

"Never mind about that!" the Masked Rider said snappily. "I'm headin' for the Big Hills country myself, and I'm aimin' to find what this is all about. When the Government or anyone else drives old folks like you two away from their homes without tellin' 'em why, there's somethin' mighty wrong—and I'm gonna find out what. Don't yuh worry about that!"

"You heard him, Sam!" said Annie White eagerly. "I believe he will do just like he said! Hurry up, get the wagon turned around so we can go back to the ranch!" She shivered

The Robin Hood Outlaw

and drew the shawl tighter about her gray head. "I'm near froze!"

THE Masked Rider sat watching as the old man started the team and swung the big wagon around in a wide circle until it was heading back in the direction from which it had come.

He sat motionless in the saddle until the curtain of falling snow blotted the wagon from view. Then from somewhere close by appeared a second rider mounted on a gray horse. He was leading two other horses. His copper-hued face was expressionless as he halted his mount beside the black-clad man. The two pack horses also stopped patiently.

"Trouble in the Big Hills country, Hawk," said the Masked Rider to his Yaqui Indian friend and companion of the dim trails. "Reckon we'll be headin' that way and see what it's all about."

"We go now, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Right!"

The two men rode south toward the mountains, and as the Masked Rider

told the Yaqui what he had learned from the old sheep rancher and his wife they knew that soon they might be battling for the right of the down-trodden and the oppressed, as was ever the mission of the black-clad outlaw and Blue Hawk.

CHAPTER II

Heading for the Box-Canyon

SOMBER gray clouds filled the vast expanse of sky like the billowing waves of a dark, stormy sea. The north wind wailed eerily through the canyons and gulches, sobbing like a lost soul as it drove the swiftly falling snowflakes before it. A mantle of fleecy white was spread over the mountain range that extended from east to north and formed the backbone of the Big Hills region.

Beyond the mountains to the south and to the west were the rolling hills. The wooded sections and the flat lands of the cattle country were all buried beneath eight inches of snow.

Here the waddies of "Breeze" Crane's Circle C spread, Gage Brackton's Bar B outfit, and the six smaller ranches rode warily, their guns always handy as they went about their daily tasks. Their gaze constantly searched the country about them, with the sullen caution of men who knew that any carelessness might mean death.

They were not gunmen, just cowboys who knew their jobs and handled them to the best of their ability. But they could fight when occasion demanded, and their tempers were growing shorter and shorter. The fires of bitter hatred burned in their hearts against whoever had instigated this grim, insidious war against them and their bosses. And the mystery of it fed the flames.

The fiery, middle-aged owner of the Bar B expressed his opinion of the general situation in no uncertain terms, for Gage Brackton was never a man to mince words.

"It was bad enough when we got them orders from the Government to give up our ranches—which we ain't doin' until we learn what it's all about," he had declared. "And fightin' a bunch of killers when yuh know who yuh're up against is plumb hell. But when yuh're goin' for a pack of dry-gulchin' pole cats that ain't men enough to come out in the open it's jest plain hell with trimmin's."

His own men and the waddies of the other spreads agreed with Brackton as did the other ranch owners. It was the uncertainty of the situation that worried all of them. Within the past week two men had died, shot out of their saddles by the rifle bullet of a hidden marksman, and each time it had happened the cowboy who had been killed had been riding alone. Who was responsible? What was the object?

No man wanted to give up and leave, no matter how hard they seemed to be forced. For it was a nice land, a pleasant land. To the waddies of the two big spreads and the other smaller ranches the Big Hills Valley was the most important bit of land in that part of the Northwest cattle country. It was a tract fifty miles square, bordered on one side by the mountains, on another by badlands and the rest of it hemmed in by the Black River that flowed down from the towering cliffs in the east and rambled on to the south.

For the past five days it had been bitter cold weather and the river was frozen solid, a sheet of thick ice from one bank to the other for miles.

Cattlemen looked across the river with suspicion every time they drew near its banks on their side of the stream. For across that broad expanse of gleaming ice was sheep country, miles and miles of it, and since the beginning of the West sheep ranchers and cattlemen had been enemies. All during spring, summer and fall the wide river had separated the sheep and

cattleland, but now the frozen water made it far too easy for either faction to cross the river and enter enemy territory.

THE Government notices had ordered the sheepmen to abandon their ranches, and that might mean they would start driving their flocks across the river over the ice. They could cross the cattle country, head into the mountains and with the coming of spring take over rich grazing land beyond the Big Hills. If they did, it would mean that the cattlemen would have to drive their herds a long way before they could again settle, if they, too, were forced to obey the Government order to give up their ranches.

This morning it had been snowing steadily ever since daybreak. And there was every sign of the storm turning into a raging blizzard before the day was over.

Down in a small hollow near the river ten warmly clad waddies from the Bar B spread cursed and shouted as they drove a herd of cattle through the snow. As they worked, the constant sense of hidden danger lingered in their minds and made them quick-tempered.

"Get them critters movin'!" shouted the slender young "Chuck" Russell, foreman of the Bar B. "We ain't got all day to fool around with this herd!"

"We'd get more work done if yuh didn't give so many orders, Chuck," snapped a small, wiry man with a heavy scowl at his foreman. "There ain't no need of yuh ridin' us all of the time."

"Still lookin' for trouble, Norton?" growled Russell, glaring at the complainer. "Mebbe yuh ain't satisfied with bein' *segundo* of this spread and would like to have my job."

"I could handle it as good as you do," Scott Norton said shortly.

"Never mind about that," Chuck Russell snapped back. "Get workin', men. There's more stock to be rounded up yet." He swung his horses to the left as a big steer decided to separate from the rest of the herd. "Where do yuh think yuh're goin'?" he growled at the steer, as his well trained cow-pony edged the two-year-old back into the herd.

The men from the Bar B outfit were driving the herd back to a box-canyon in the Big Hills, a canyon whose towering, overhanging cliffs would shelter and protect the cattle from the brunt of the winter weather, and where there were places that were never covered by the snow.

It seemed like a simple task, but it was a two-mile drive and the wind and snow made the going more and more difficult as the herd advanced. Twice in the last half hour steers had fallen into the dry bed of a winding creek that was hidden by the snow, and the Bar B men had been forced to pull them out again, working with ropes and horses.

"Kinda wish I was a sheepman like them folks across the river," muttered one of the two waddies riding drag. "Bet they don't have no trouble with them woollies like we been havin' with these critters."

"That's what you think!" grunted his riding mate, wiping the snow out of his face with his neckerchief. "Them sheep is hard to take care of in winter, too. Besides them sheepmen got Government orders to move out jest like we did on this side of the river."

Had he been able to see the fifteen men who were working with a flock of sheep half a mile away he would have realized that he was right. The sheep were proving as difficult as were the cattle.

The fifteen men on foot were having their own troubles driving the sheep across the thick ice of the river. Their flock was about as large as the cattle herd the Bar B men were working, and they would have had even less success in their efforts had it not been for the pair of well trained sheep dogs that were doing most of the real heavy work.

THE woolly creatures were hard to manage. Every time the herders got the sheep started across the ice, half of them would abruptly turn back, heading for the shore they had just left. The dogs would bring them back into line, barking and snapping at their heels.

The herders themselves were having trouble, for the ice was slippery and they were trying to move quickly in order to aid the dogs in keeping the sheep moving. At times they fell and got up cursing.

"Keep 'em goin'," roared a man who appeared to be in charge. "Yuh heard our orders. Get the sheep across the river and into that box-canyon 'fore the cattlemen can get their stock there!"

"Shore we heard the orders," said another man. "And if yuh ask me, John Murdock is crazy! No tellin' what them cattlemen will do when they find we're runnin' sheep across the river into their territory."

"What of it?" demanded the leader. His eyes swept swiftly over his men. Each of them wore a heavy Colt in a holster. "Yuh ain't wearin' yore guns for ornament, are yuh?" His voice was hard and filled with meaning. "If them cattlemen want to start trouble we'll finish it!" He stopped with a curse as he saw that part of the flock had turned back for a third time. "Head them woollies off!" he shouted. "Keep 'em moving!"

As the men worked, aided by the two trained sheep dogs, gradually the sheep made their way across the frozen river, their sharp little feet slipping and sliding. Some fell and had to be picked up by the herders, but the rest of the flock kept right on moving.

Bleating, woolly little animals heading into the Valley of the Big Hills—and with their coming bringing the gun-blazing fury of a sheep and cattle war!

Back in the mountains a hard-eyed man crouched on a ledge on the south side of a pass. He shivered as the snow drifted down his neck despite the upturned collar of his sheepskin coat. Constantly he wiped his rifle with a dirty bandana as though he expected to have use for the weapon at any moment and wanted to be sure that it was ready.

"Comin'!" he muttered as he peered down into the rolling country spread out beneath him. His gaze fixed on a spot of silver in the distance to the southward. "Got them sheep across the river—it's about time!"

For twenty minutes the man on the ledge patiently waited. Within the last month he had waited many times to deal out death with the rifle in his hands. And others like him were scattered about in these mountains; killers all.

He uttered a soft chuckle that was like a death's head laughing, then grew tense as he peered down.

Below him tiny figures were moving through the snow. To his left a patch of grayish white was sprinkled with darker forms. The flock of sheep, the dogs, and the herders. To his right was a dark blotch. That was the Bar B herd being driven through the snow by the waddies.

"Have to pass right under me 'fore they get to the box-canyon," he muttered. "And I'll be ready for 'em!" Death was in his voice, and again he carefully wiped off the Winchester in his hands.

ON over the snow-covered hills came the sheep and cattle—traveling at right angles to each other. As yet the two advancing forces were hidden from each other by a high hill that rose in the center of the valley through which they advanced. But it would not be long before they would come together.

Beyond the rise they would meet, Brackton's Bar B waddies and the herders who obeyed the orders of John Murdock, leader of the sheep ranchers of the whole section. Down there in the pass that formed the entrance to Shelter Canyon they would

come together. Within the canyon the towering walls leaned outward as though they might tumble at any moment, but it was thus they had been for centuries, and their very construction formed shelter beneath them.

Here the snow never lingered to any great extent and there was dry bunchgrass and shelter for the stock. Here in this big box-canyon it was possible to bring the stock feed and to keep them fairly well protected during the long cold winter.

On they came, the sheepmen and their flock quite a bit in the lead as

Chuck Russell

they rounded the hill. A shout of rage rose from the cattlemen as they saw the bunch of woolly creatures moving across the snow.

"Sheep!" growled Chuck Russell. The eyes of the young foreman were hard and angry. "A whole flock of them damn woollies—and on our side of the river!"

"Mebbe they'll all go runnin' home if yuh say 'boo' to 'em, Chuck," sneered Norton, the little *segundo*.

"Tell it scarey!"

"I will!" snapped the foreman. "Four of you men come with me. Rest of yuh keep the herd movin'. We're gonna try and reason with these sheepmen."

"Reason with sheepmen!" scoffed Scott Norton. "That shore will be somethin'!"

The lips of the man on the ledge twisted in a grim smile as he raised his rifle, watching. It was such a smile as might have been worn by some macabre skeleton dancing in a graveyard.

So intent was he on the scene below him that he did not see the figure that had appeared on a ridge trail on the opposite side of the pass. A mounted man, tall, broad-shouldered, clad entirely in black from the crown of his sombrero to his cowboy boots. A dark cape fluttered from his shoulders. Beneath it, he wore a heavy black fleece-lined coat, short enough to enable him to reach, without interference, the guns he wore on either hip.

The horseman, on the magnificent black stallion, wore a black mask across the upper part of his face. Reining in, he sat statuelike, watching the drama about to begin.

From the opposite side of the pass came a sound like that of a whip snapping as the man on the ledge fired, his sights centered on one of the tiny figures below.

A sheepman threw up his hands and fell face downward in the snow as the bullet struck him.

"Them waddies started it!" shouted one of the other herders, the shouted words reaching high above the pass. Instantly the fourteen men were milling around wildly. "Had a drygulcher hid out up there on the ledge!" He snatched out his gun as five riders neared, coming from the direction of the Bar B herd. "I'll teach 'em!"

CHUCK RUSSELL and the four men with him clawed at their holsters as a sudden hail of lead from the sheepmen greeted them.

The sandy-haired young foreman shot the gun out of the hand of the herder who had started the trouble. The Bar B men were firing carefully, trying only to wound their foes. The orders of Gage Brackton had been

strict that his men do no killing unless it was necessary.

The hard-eyed man on the ridge raised his rifle for a second shot. But the black-clad man on the ridge trail had a Winchester in his hands now. And it was he who fired first —at the killer on the ledge.

His victim caught just one glimpse of the black-clad man on the big black horse, at the moment the bullet caught him in the chest.

"The Masked Rider!"

His voice was an eerie wail that mingled with the moaning of the north wind. Then his lifeless form went hurtling out into space to drop to the floor of the canyon three hundred feet below.

CHAPTER III

Massacre

THE black-clad man on the big stallion was a legend of the rangeland from the Mexican border far to the north. His name was whispered by hard-eyed hombres who lived by the rule of the gun. Plodding sodbusters spoke of him as they worked in fertile valleys. Cattlemen talked of him as did waddies in the bunkhouses.

The stories about him were legion, stories of a fighting fury who battled valiantly to aid the downtrodden and the oppressed, even though he himself was an outlaw, a wanderer of the owlhoot trails. Such was the Masked Rider, as he was known wherever men whispered his exploits — and they were legion.

Though still young his past was a closed book. Not even Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian who was his friend and constant companion, knew his real name. That was a closely guarded secret of his buried life before he had become an outlaw who faithfully followed the best legends of Robin Hood of another day.

There were times when he assumed the rôle of Wayne Morgan, a wandering cowboy. That part he could make convincing in any man's eyes, for not only was he an experienced cowhand, but a bronco buster with few equals.

It had been his meeting with the old sheep rancher and his wife that had brought him into the Big Hills region. He still felt that there was something wrong in this part of the country and he wanted to know all about it. Never could the Masked Rider pass by even mute appeals for aid, or a chance to lend a hand for justice's sake, no matter what other mission might have been calling him. For in the mind and heart of the Masked Rider there was never any other business that called that could compare with the plea, though it might be unspoken, of the oppressed.

Calmly now, he thrust his rifle back into the saddleboot as he saw the killer who had been on the opposite cliff go hurtling down.

"Good shot, Senor," called a rider who had just appeared on the ridge trail behind him. "Knew you would get him."

The Masked Rider smiled at the copper-hued man on the gray horse. Beneath a battered old Stetson the Yaqui's chiseled face was impassive as he halted his mount. His dark eyes scanned the terrain beneath them.

"Trouble, Senor," Blue Hawk said. The Yaqui's English would have appeared astonishingly good to one who had not known he had learned in a mission school in his boyhood. "Too many men with that flock of sheep and they are all heavily armed."

"Yuh're right, Hawk," the Masked Rider agreed. "Ain't sayin' I'm sidin' with either side yet, but we'll be gettin' down in the valley where we can take a hand in this if need be."

Lifting reins he rode on along the ridge trail, the Yaqui following close behind.

Down in the pass Chuck Russell and his four waddies were gradually convincing the sheepmen—with the best

of arguments, hot lead—that they had made a mistake. Even though there were ten more herders than Bar B horsemen, the waddies were making every shot count. Five of the men from across the river had been wounded, though not seriously, when the Bar B foreman shouted:

"You jaspers had enough?"

Through the heat of battle the sheepmen could see that more cowboys had left the herd and were riding toward them at full tilt. Cattle had circled around the sheep, too, and now as they spread out they cut off any further possibility that the herders could drive their flock into the box-canyon first.

"NO use of us fightin' any longer," growled the leader of the sheepmen. "They got the cattle herd in there—ain't a chance of us gettin' the sheep into the canyon." He raised his voice. "All right, hombre. We quit!"

Dropping his gun back into the holster, he motioned for the rest of his men to do likewise.

"Git them woollies out of here!" ordered Chuck Russell. "Drive yore flock back across the river where they belong."

At a shouted word of command from one of the herders the two sheep dogs rounded up the flock that had begun to spread out, and started them back across the snow toward the river.

Cursing in a steady monotone, and casting baleful glances at the four mounted men who sat in their saddles, keenly watching, the sheepmen followed their flock.

"What's the idea?" demanded one of the sheepmen in a low tone, as he moved up beside his leader. "There's fourteen of us—and only ten of them waddies with the whole cattle herd. We woulda licked 'em if it had come to a show-down. And you let four men scare yuh!"

"Didn't scare me none," snapped the leader. "I was jest obeyin' orders. Murdock said if we reached Shelter Canyon first and got the sheep settled there we was to down every waddy we met—but not to start too much trouble while we was out in the open."

"More of John Murdock's orders!" growled the other man. "I said he's crazy, and he is! So are the rest of the sheep owners that listen to him!"

"Why don't yuh tell him so?" the man addressed suggested drily.

"'Cause I ain't crazy, even if he is," was the snapped answer. "I aim to live yet awhile."

The flock had rounded the hill in the center of the valley and were out of sight of the Bar B outfit working with the cattle. And they had just disappeared when, from the southwest, appeared a band of mounted men, at least twenty of them. They were forcing their horses through the snow toward the sheepmen and their flock.

"More waddies comin'," the leader of the sheepmen cried sharply. "Good thing we didn't keep on fightin'. There's too damn many cattlemen in this valley!"

The fourteen herders plodded on through the snow, making no attempt to go for their guns as the riders silently drew closer. Murdock's men had been ordered back across the river and they were going without further argument.

The horsemen, all cold-eyed, hard-faced men, spread out fanlike on the south side of the moving men and sheep.

"Let 'em have it!" roared a big man with a scar over his left eye. His gun leaped out of his holster as he voiced the command. "Down the sons!"

His words were the signal for a withering blast of gunfire from every man with him. The leader of the sheep herders died with an expression of surprise on his face as he crumpled face downward in the snow. Another screamed out in pain as a bullet caught him in the chest.

The mounted men were firing as ruthlessly as if they were shooting at

rats trapped in a pit. One sheepman tried to snatch out his gun—and the bullets of four men thudded into his body. Like an attacking wolf one of the sheep dogs launched himself through the air as he saw his master go down. A hail of bullets stopped the dog in mid-air. And he dropped to the snow.

"Gun the sheep, too!" yelled the big man with the scar. "Every one of 'em! And get that other dog, too!"

BLOOD stained the white snow as the last of the sheepmen fell. Men who had not even been granted a chance to fight for their lives. And still the mounted men kept on firing, killing off the sheep by the dozen. Bloody crimes of which only the perpetrators were aware. For they had attacked the sheepmen fully a mile from the canyon, and with the wind still coming from the north the sound of the firing had not carried to the waddies of the Bar B outfit with the cattle.

"Don't leave one of them sheep alive!" shouted the scarred man. Swift as his words his gun roared, and each time another helpless little woolly creature died. "Git 'em all—jest like we done the herders!"

In twenty minutes the massacre was over. Men and dogs and sheep lay grotesquely dead. At a word of command from the big man the twenty horsemen wheeled their mounts and rode back through the snow in the direction from which they had come.

They had hardly disappeared in the distance before two riders loomed into view, coming from the north. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk approached. They had heard the sound of shooting from the distance, but not until they drew closer did they see what had occurred.

A wave of horror enveloped the black-clad man as he saw the carnage. Steely blue eyes swept over the still forms sprawled out in the blood-stained snow. His face grew hard and grim.

"Killed everyone of them sheepmen, Hawk," he muttered, his voice hoarse. "Downed them without even givin' 'em a chance to go for their guns! Dirty sneakin' coyotes that done this ain't got the right to call theirselves men!"

"Might be some who still live, Senor."

The Yaqui slid out of his saddle. The tall outlaw also dismounted.

Swiftly they examined each of the fallen men, but well knew it was a useless gesture. Every one of the fourteen herders bore at least two fatal bullet wounds in his body. And even as they finished their search for some remaining spark of life the Masked Rider was unconsciously loosening the heavy Colts in his holsters, assuring himself they worked freely and were ready for a quick draw.

"We're trailing them killers, Hawk," he said tensely, as he moved toward his black stallion. "Figger mebbe they're back of some of the trouble hereabouts—whoever they are. And they better have their guns ready when we meet up with 'em!"

His right foot struck against something that was buried in the snow. He reached down and picked it up—a small pointed stake that had been cut out of rough wood and on which the letters N. & W. were branded.

For an instant the Masked Rider studied it, then shrugged and tossed it aside. There was only one thing that he could think of now, and that was the ruthless slaughter that had left this land of snow blood red. Hate raged in his heart against the fiends who had perpetrated this massacre.

His blue eyes were like ice as he reached Midnight, his stallion, and swung into the saddle. Imperturbably the Yaqui mounted his gray horse, but while Blue Hawk's face was impassive his eyes gleamed with a light that was as bitter as that in the steely ones of the Masked Rider.

It was still snowing, the white flakes falling on the lifeless forms as though Nature were hastening to cover up

Morgan's Colt appeared in his right hand as the man fired
(Chapter XII)

what the hands of men had wrought.

The storm was at their backs as the two riders headed south toward the river. They did not speak, but the Yaqui had drawn a rifle out of his saddle sheath and rode with the weapon in his left hand.

Again the black-clad man touched the butts of the heavy Colts in his holsters. Into the storm the two men went, fighting wanderers riding through country swept by the chill north wind that moaned of death.

CHAPTER IV

Sortie at the River Bank

ON through the storm went the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. At first it had not been difficult for them to read sign and follow the trail of the horsemen who had dealt such ruthless death to the sheepmen and their flock. The cold had formed a crust on the snow and the hoofprints of the horses ahead had been clearly visible. But since then it had started snowing harder and the drifts, carried by the wind, quickly blotted out the trail.

Now as they rode they found that they were approaching a thicket of brush and small trees close to the bank of the river. They were not more than a hundred yards away from this spot when the Yaqui suddenly grew tense.

"Careful, Senor." Blue Hawk raised his rifle. "Danger somewhere in brush!"

The Masked Rider's eyes narrowed and his hands were close to his guns as they rode nearer to the brush along the river bank. He had experienced the same sensation as had the Yaqui, that strange feeling that danger was imminent. Always he gave heed to such warnings, for by so doing he had many times saved his life.

"Look!" shouted Blue Hawk. Hastily he raised his rifle, dropping the reins on the neck of the gray. "They come, Senor!"

But no warning was needed. For even as a band of horsemen dashed out of the brush the Masked Rider's guns were bucking and flaming. Eight hard-faced men flung themselves forward, their heavy Colts barking. Apparently they had counted on the element of surprise to conquer the black-clad rider on the big stallion and his companion on the gray. If so they were sadly mistaken.

Midnight's feet flashed through the snow as the Masked Rider urged him directly at the foe. And close behind the fighting black-clad fury came Blue Hawk. The Indian's rifle was blazing as he came on, the weapon booming. His aim was as true as was that of the Robin Hood outlaw who was mowing men down.

One of the attacking riders fell as a bullet caught him in the heart. He had started to slide out of the saddle but his right foot caught in the stirrup.

His horse, frightened to panic, lunged away, bucking and kicking as it dragged its dead rider across the snow, hanging head downward.

"Get him!" shouted one of the onrushing attackers. "Down that hombre on the big hoss! That's the Masked Rider!"

He blazed away, just added din to the steady roaring. The Masked Rider's guns were flaming too, as he made every one of the twelve shots in his two Colts count. The man who had just shouted so defiantly died with a bullet in his head.

Lead whistled all around the Masked Rider. One bullet tore through the edge of his fluttering black cloak, another nicked the brim of his black sombrero. But those guns in his hands were still roaring, and another man slid out of his saddle.

"Down them jaspers!" came the yell of a bull-voiced attacker. He cursed as he discovered that the rest of his bunch had suddenly whirled their horses and were heading back for the thicket near the river. "Yuh yeller coyotes!"

Abruptly then he was conscious that the black-clad horseman was bearing down on him. The Masked Rider was so close that his foe could see his lean jaw, set hard beneath the mask. He caught the glitter of cold blue eyes, saw the hands hidden in black gauntlets tighten on the triggers of the long-barreled .45s.

WITH a shout of terror the raider fired. His bullet came so close to the Masked Rider that it all but grazed his left cheek. The gun in the outlaw's right hand boomed.

A startled expression swept over the face of the lone attacker who had been deserted by his companions, as the bullet caught him in the heart. Limply he slid out of the saddle.

The rest of the men had swiftly dismounted and sought cover as soon as they had reached the shelter of the trees and brush. Three of the original eight had died, and the five remaining men were firing slowly and more carefully now.

The Masked Rider grunted as a bullet hit the horn of his saddle. The aim of those killing devils was getting far too good.

He whirled Midnight. A hasty retreat was best now, at least until he was able to find some cover that would protect him as adequately as it did his foes. There was no fear in his heart. Fear had not inspired his move, but merely the cool caution of a man who knew how to fight and to take advantage of every opportunity.

A sickening wave of horror swept over him as he spied the figure clad in white that was sprawled out in the snow. There was no mistaking that copper-hued face and the long black hair. Blue Hawk was lying there motionless, and off to the left the Yaqui's horse was galloping away.

"Hawk!" groaned the Masked Rider brokenly. "Looks like they got yuh."

He galloped closer, abruptly reining in. The men in the brush were still firing steadily, even though the black-clad horseman was now some distance away. The Masked Rider was well aware that at any moment one of those bullets might strike him and inflict a mortal wound, but that did not matter now.

Only one thought drummed through his brain. The Indian who so long had been his loyal and faithful friend was lying there wounded, perhaps dead. They might never again ride the long dim trails together. They might never again fight valiantly

[*Turn Page*]

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against vicious killers who outnumbered them four to one.

The Masked Rider slid out of the saddle, boots crunching in the snow as he ran to the Yaqui and hastily picked him up in his strong arms. Blood was on the Yaqui's face and his eyes were closed. That was all the Masked Rider could see, all of which he was aware, while bullets plucked at his clothing like the seeking fingers of death. For a moment only Blue Hawk roused himself a little, as the Masked Rider fired back at the attackers. Then the Indian fell back in the snow as if gone. There was no time for the Masked Rider to try to even learn if his loyal companion's heart was still beating.

He thrust his guns back into the holsters as he picked up Blue Hawk, and with Yaqui in his arms he made his way to the big black horse. With an effort he managed to climb back into the saddle.

"Get him now!" came a shout from the bush. "Go after him, boys!"

A mounted man came dashing out of the thicket as the Masked Rider urged Midnight into motion. Closer drew the hard-faced pursuer, determined to get within easy range before he fired.

HIS gun was in his hand and there was a gloating leer on his cruel face. He knew of this black-clad horseman! Who didn't? And to boast that he had been the one at last to down the Masked Rider would give him prestige among those skulking human jackals with whom he traveled, that never yet had been his. Howling with unholy glee he raised his Colt. Close enough now!

But a gun had suddenly appeared in the Masked Rider's right hand as he rode pell-mell with the limp form of the Yaqui draped across the saddle in front of him. He turned and fired. And again a man died with a bullet in his heart—his pursurer, with a thick, dirty finger on the trigger of the heavy Colt he had not even been able to use. His boast would never be uttered. For he had died—and the Masked Rider still lived.

Faster and faster went Midnight through the snow, heading north toward the Big Hills, plowing onward through the storm. Once the Masked Rider glanced back, but there was no sign of his being followed by the four men left of the eight who had waited in ambush near the river.

"Them jaspers wasn't waitin' there jest 'cause they hoped Hawk and me would come along neither," muttered the man in black.

"No, Senor," said the Yaqui weakly. "You right."

The Masked Rider's heart leaped. Blue Hawk had regained consciousness! At least Hawk was still alive, even though he did not know as yet just how badly the Yaqui might be wounded.

"Hawk!" he exclaimed. "Yuh hurt bad?"

"Bullet just creased my head and knocked me out," the Yaqui said stolidly. "Will be all right in a few minutes, Senor."

"Good!"

Not until they reached a spot at the foot of the hill that was sheltered from view did the Masked Rider halt Midnight. With an effort he managed to climb out of the saddle with Blue Hawk, without shaking the Indian. He placed the Yaqui down in the snow and examined his wound. A bullet had cut a gash across the top of the Indian's head, but his thick, dark, shoulder length hair had protected him to a certain extent. He had merely been knocked unconscious by the glancing blow of the bullet.

The Masked Rider wiped away the blood with a bandanna dipped into the wet snow, then tied up Blue Hawk's head.

"Looks almost as pretty as some of them colored bandeaus yuh wear to keep yore hair from gettin' in yore eyes," the outlaw said, with a grin, when he had finished.

Blue Hawk merely smiled as he got

to his feet. These two understood each other. If the Yaqui realized how much of a shock it had been to the Masked Rider to find him apparently dead he gave no indication of it.

"Somethin' strange goin' on around here, Hawk," said the Masked Rider. "And I'm aimin' to find out all about it." He swung into the saddle after carefully reloading his guns. "You wait here while I try and round up yore gray hoss."

"*Si*, Senor," said the Yaqui. "And if you could find my rifle—"

"That's so." The black-robed outlaw took his own rifle out of the saddle boot and handed it to the Yaqui. "Mebbe yuh better keep this handy until I get back."

Half an hour later he succeeded in finding Blue Hawk's gray. The horse had wandered into the shelter of some overhanging rocks and was standing where he was protected from the storm.

FINALLY he returned to where he had left the Yaqui. Blue Hawk was still waiting when his outlaw companion returned. The Indian's face was drawn and he was shivery with the cold in his white cotton drill trousers and a shirt. His battered old hat had been knocked from his head and lost when he had been shot off his horse. While he usually wrapped a blanket around him, Indian fashion, to protect him from the cold, he had left this tied to his saddle when he and the Masked Rider had so precipitately ridden down off the mountain to enter the war between the sheepmen and cattlemen.

"Reckon we'll head back toward the river and see if we can't find yore hat and rifle," the Masked Rider suggested as Blue Hawk swung into saddle. "Good thing we left them other two hosses we brought with us hid back in that cave in the mountains. It ain't good to work Midnight and yore hoss all the time in this weather."

It was snowing harder and the storm appeared to be turning into a first-class blizzard. The wind blew ice flakes into their faces and down into their necks, and they were finding the going decidedly uncomfortable. Apparently the horses did not like it any better than did the men, for they snorted continually, edging around in an effort to keep their backs to the wind.

"If them four hombres are still hidin' out down by the river they're

A band of men was firing at the windows

crazy," said the Masked Rider, and that was all he said as he and the Yaqui made straight for the scene of their late encounter.

CHAPTER V

The Student Trapper

REACHING the spot where they had battled the mounted men, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk discovered there was no longer anyone there. Even the bodies of the four dead men had been taken away.

After searching for a few minutes,

Blue Hawk was finally able to find his rifle and hat, buried in the snow. Evidently he had mentally registered almost the exact spot where had fallen or he would never have found them.

"Lot of things I'd like to know about around here, Hawk," the Masked Rider said as they rode back toward the mountains, seeking a place where they could be sheltered from the storm. The wind had suddenly died down, and while the snow still fell silently they could hear each other without shouting. "Such as who was that jasper up on the ledge downin' the sheepmen with his rifle. And another thing—why were all those sheepherders and their flock and their dogs killed, and why were the sheepmen so heavily armed in the first place?"

"If they were expecting trouble sheepmen would be armed, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "This side of river not sheep country. I'm sure of that."

"Because we seen them waddies workin' the cattle herd, yuh mean?"

"Other cattle around also," said the Yaqui. "Saw them when we rode along ridge trail."

"That's right," the Masked Rider suddenly remembered. "And those sheepmen were headin' their flock back toward the river when they were killed. They musta been tryin' to start trouble a little while before that, all right." He frowned. "And they shore got it, poor devils."

They had circled around to the northeast so that they were not far from Shelter Canyon when they reached the mountains. The Masked Rider suddenly halted Midnight and sat peering down into a deep ravine. Something down there was half buried in the snow; a dark figure.

"It is a man, Senor," said Blue Hawk as he slid out of saddle. "And he is not dead. I saw his arm move."

Ground-hitching his gray, the Yaqui's moccasin-clad feet padded softly through the snow as he advanced to the edge of the ravine and looked down. The Masked Rider swung out of saddle, dropping Midnight's reins down in front of the stallion as the black-clad rider joined the Yaqui at the side of the gulch.

It was a sheer thirty-foot drop to where the motionless figure was sprawled out in the snow. They caught a glimpse of a bearded face and thick, shaggy gray hair.

"We've got to get him out of there, Hawk," the outlaw said instantly. "I'll go down after him. You can lower me with my rope."

"Better that Blue Hawk go down, Senor," said the Yaqui. "Am lighter than you and moccasins better for climbing in snow than your boots."

"Yuh're right, at that."

The Masked Rider returned to the stallion and swung into saddle. Quickly he uncoiled his rope from where it had hung on the kak, then rode Midnight closer to the edge of the cliff. He shook out the forty-foot length of rope, then snaked it over the edge of the gulch. The other end he tied to the saddle horn.

"She reach?" he asked as he glanced at Blue Hawk who stood closer to the edge of the cliff, peering down.

"Yes." The Yaqui nodded. "I go down now."

He caught the rope with both hands and slid down into the gulch. The Masked Rider sat in the saddle waiting tensely as the rope grew taut, the weight of the Yaqui's body taking up the slack.

THERE were jagged rocks down in the gulch and if the rope should break it would mean that Blue Hawk would be sent hurtling down—to death perhaps; and certainly to grave injury.

The outlaw breathed a sigh of relief as the rope grew slack. Blue Hawk had reached the bottom of the ravine!

"You all right, Hawk?" he called down.

"*Si,* Senor." Answering from the depths of that gulch made the Yaqui's voice sound as if he were miles away. "Man is still alive, but half frozen.

Must get him some place where it is warm quickly."

"Tie the rope to him and I'll pull him out!" shouted the Masked Rider.

"All right."

For a few minutes the outlaw waited, then he heard Blue Hawk's voice again.

"Ready now, Senor. Take him up."

The Masked Rider gigged Midnight and as the black stallion moved away the rope tightened. As the horse advanced the man that Blue Hawk had fastened to the rope was slowly dragged up the side of the gulch. The outlaw halted his mount as soon as the unconscious form slid over the lip of the ledge. Then he rode back, swung out of saddle and unfastened the rope.

He tossed the rope back down into the ravine and in a few moments Blue Hawk appeared, climbing up over the side of the ravine. Midnight had stood motionless when he had felt the rope tighten, for the stallion had been trained as a cow pony.

Kneeling beside the prone figure of the gray bearded man he and Blue Hawk had rescued, the Masked Rider examined the still figure in the snow. The unconscious man, he decided, was a trapper. A sturdy specimen, at that, for he did not long remain unconscious.

"Thanks for pullin' me out of there," the trapper mumbled, as he opened his eyes. "Name's Jim Carew. Got cabin back in mountains to north. Kinda sleepy now."

"Hear that, Hawk?" the outlaw said sharply. "We've got to head for his cabin, pronto. This hombre is near froze to death!"

"I'll carry him, Senor," Blue Hawk offered. "You give him to me after I'm in saddle."

The Yaqui mounted and rode closer to the trapper. The outlaw picked up the man who had called himself Jim Carew and handed him to the Indian. This done the Masked Rider swung into saddle himself. Guided by the instructions of the hazily conscious gray-bearded man they rode with what haste they could in the direction of the oldster's cabin.

They had not ridden more than half a mile when they saw it ahead of them —a log cabin looming dimly through the snow that was falling steadily.

"That's my place," muttered Carew.

In minutes more they reached it and found there also was a leanto behind it that would offer shelter for their horses. After they had carried the trapper into the cabin and put away their mounts, covering both of them with blankets, they busied themselves inside the log structure.

There was an open fireplace in one corner. Blue Hawk found dry wood beside it and quickly built a fire. The crackling flames were cheerful to the three half frozen men, almost at once dissipating the cabin's chill.

Meanwhile the Masked Rider swiftly undressed Carew and rubbed his frozen arms, legs and face with snow, then wrapped him in blankets from his bunk. He noted, as he administered to the all but helpless trapper, that the old fellow's cabin was well equipped for a long hard winter. There was plenty of canned food on the shelves and a big five gallon stone jug of water stood in one corner.

"He'll be all right," the Masked Rider said as he placed old Carew on his bunk. "Not as bad as I thought— jest a little frost-bit, that's all."

"Better now." The trapper looked up at the man in black. "Who are yuh, anyhow? Why are yuh wearin' that mask?"

"There's a reason for that," answered the outlaw, the faint trace of a smile showing beneath the mask. "Folks call me the Masked Rider."

"Masked Rider, eh!" said Carew, astonishment in his eyes. "Heard of yuh. Yeah, I shore have. What yuh doin' in the Big Hills Country?"

"What brought me first," the Masked Rider said frankly, "don't amount to so much now. Jest passin' through, say, but that can wait. What I'm doin' right now that I am here is

tryin' to find out who's back of all the trouble around here. What I'd like to know is why the Government gave orders for all of the ranchers to move out; sheepmen and cowmen alike, I've been hearin'."

"Government my foot," said Carew, with a scornful sniff. "You been able to take a good look at them notices that Sheriff Alton handed out to all the sheepherders and cattlemen?"

"No, I haven't," the masked man said. "What's wrong with 'em?"

"Hump! A right plenty, I'd say. In the first place they are writ in pen and ink. Government has printin' presses and them fancy new-fangled typewriters for things like that, ain't they?"

"Yeah. So I always thought." The Masked Rider nodded.

"Me, too!" said Carew, with a firm accent of his nodding gray beard. "In the second place they ain't signed by no official—jest says by order of the United States Government. If you was to ask me I'd say there was somethin' mighty wrong about the notices."

"Yuh seem to know a heap about what's goin' on around here for a trapper that lives back in the mountains," the outlaw remarked thoughtfully.

"Uh-huh!" Old Carew nodded again. "Mebbe I'm a trapper but I ain't no hermit. I hear and see what's goin' on."

The Masked Rider surveyed the old man speculatively.

"How'd yuh get down in that gulch where we found yuh?" he asked.

"Was walking along through the storm when three riders come along and started to ride me down," the bearded man told him, indignantly. "I leaped back to get out of the way and fell into the gulch. Musta hit on my head when I landed— 'cause I didn't know no more about it till I found you and that Indian was draggin' me outa there."

"Yuh recognize the hombres that rode yuh down?"

"Nope—didn't have time." Carew frowned. "They come at me too fast."

"Any reason for 'em wantin' to get rid of you around here?" demanded the probing outlaw.

"Ain't sayin'," the trapper said promptly. "Done talked too much already. All the same I'm grateful for yuh pullin' me out of that ravine and yuh're shore welcome to stay here long as yuh like."

"Thanks. Reckon we will stay till the storm lets up a little." The black-clad man removed his cloak and sheepskin coat, but did not take off the mask. "Trappin' been good, Carew?"

"Nothin' to speak of," said the graybeard. "Ain't got no pelts lately."

"So I see."

THE outlaw glanced around the cabin as he dropped on the crude bench that served as a chair. Blue Hawk was squatted on his heels close to the fire. The place looked peculiarly bare for a trapper's cabin, with no signs of skins whatever drying on the walls.

"Don't reckon yuh'll get many till the weather is better. This snow musta shore buried yore traps."

"The Masked Rider," muttered Carew as though thinking aloud. "I've heard a plumb plenty about you. Strange kind of outlaw, huh? A wanted man and yet yuh spend all yore time helpin' them that need yuh bad. Kinda picked yuh a job in life, didn't yuh?"

The tall, dark-haired man in the mask glanced at a battered book lying on the table. Shakespeare. "As You Like It."

"'All the world's a stage,'" he quoted, repeating the familiar line in the play. "'And all the men and women merely players.'"

"They have their exits and their entrances,'" Carew took it up casually. "'And one man in his time plays many parts.'"

The tall outlaw's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the bearded man on the bunk. A rough trapper who quoted Shakespeare so easily was decidedly unusual.

"All right, Carew," he said snappily.

"Don't know jest who and what yuh are, but yuh're no more of a trapper than I am. What's the idea?"

"Kinda like you, hombre," said the man on the bunk. "And jest might be that you are right." He frowned. "But I ain't trusting yuh entirely yet. Yuh'll have to wait awhile before I tell yuh why I'm here."

"Let it go at that. It's yore business, I reckon." The outlaw grinned and shrugged as he turned to the fire. "Figger yuh'll tell me when it comes time." He glanced at the Yaqui. "How about stirrin' us up a little grub?"

CHAPTER VI

Attack at the Ranch

IT was late afternoon before the storm was finally over. For three hours the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had remained in elderly, bearded Jim Carew's cabin with him. They had eaten a meal prepared by the Yaqui and talked casually.

The masked man had made no further attempt to find out just why Carew was living in the cabin and pretending to be a trapper. He felt that when the other man wanted to talk he would do so. It would do no good to urge the old fellow.

Carew's statement that there was something wrong with the orders, or rather with the supposed Government notices given to the ranchers, had given the wandering outlaw food for thought. If someone was handing out fake Government notices in order to drive all of the ranchers out of this part of the country, then the Masked Rider wanted to know why.

Finally he and the Yaqui left, after assuring themselves that Jim Carew was quite comfortable. They rode back into the mountains to the cave where they had left their other two horses.

"So now I'll head for the nearest ranch as Wayne Morgan," announced the outlaw. "Just like we decided on the way here. You scout around across the river and see what yuh can learn over in the sheep country, Hawk. Find Sam White's sheep ranch—yuh know, him and his old wife that we first run into and sent back. Make shore them two old people are all right. I'm right interested in 'em, Hawk."

"*Si*, Senor," Blue Hawk promised.

The Masked Rider swiftly changed his saddle and bridle from the big black stallion to a rangy-looking ham-herheaded roan. Then he removed his cloak, sombrero and black sheepskin coat. From one of the two packs that had been carried on the back of the extra horses he drew out a brown sheepskin coat and a gray Stetson and put them on.

Then the mask came off to reveal a face strong and ruggedly handsome. The Robin Hood outlaw had disappeared. The man who had emerged in his place was a typical wandering waddy, though far from the type of man who might ever be considered a range tramp.

The metamorphosed man placed the black mask in his pocket. But the rest of the trappings of the Masked Rider were carefully wrapped in the saddle-roll that was fastened to the cantle of the saddle on the roan. And in more than one sense had the Masked Rider disappeared. So accustomed had the outlaw who bore both names become to the interchange of character in his dual rôle that no sooner was the black mask off his face than to all intents and purposes the Masked Rider was a myth; not real. Only the man who stood in the Masked Rider's boots was real—the wandering cowboy who called himself Wayne Morgan.

Moreover, he thought of himself as Wayne Morgan as soon as he assumed the part. But though he was consistently two separate identities as Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider, never did the outlaw who rode the Western trails, gaining for himself a name in that Robin Hood tradition, even him-

self think of his other name—the name to which he had been born. That name had been forgotten, abandoned somewhere in his dim and deeply buried past.

THE Yaqui, too, had been busy, transferring his kak and bridle from the gray horse to a wicked-eyed pinto. He, however, made no attempt to disguise himself in any way. There was little chance of his being recognized as the man who had been riding with the Masked Rider when they had battled the attackers at the river bank. At a casual glance Indians looked very much alike, and there were plenty of them in this vicinity.

"Figger on meetin' yuh at Carew's cabin sometime tonight," said Morgan —as the Masked Rider now thought of himself—as they mounted and rode out of the cave.

Behind them they left Midnight and the Indian's gray horse, blanket-covered and well supplied with feed and water. For there was a little underground stream in the cave, and they had brought feed with them in one of the packs. Both horses were hobbled so they could not get away.

"But if I don't make it until late, or even tomorrow," the tall, dark "waddie" went on, "don't worry, Hawk. No tellin' what I'll mebbe run across at some of these spreads around here."

"I will not worry," the Yaqui said placidly. "Blue Hawk knows that the Senor can take care of himself."

They parted as they reached the foothills, having decided it might be wise if they were not seen together. The man who now was Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, rode slowly through the deep snow, heading southwest. From the ridge trail he and Blue Hawk earlier had seen the buildings of a ranch far in the distance in that direction.

An hour of steady riding finally brought him to a stretch of flat country. Ahead were the buildings he had seen, looming far larger now and more impressive-looking. The ranchhouse was a big, rambling structure built on a knoll, and below the hill on either side of it were smaller buildings, one obviously a barn, another the bunkhouse, and a third a harness shed.

Haystacks were scattered all about, one close to the ranchhouse. Obviously a hard winter was expected.

"Right considerable spread," muttered Morgan as he drew near. "Reckon the jasper that owns this outfit must be the king pin around this part of the country."

He had nearly reached the front of the ranchhouse when a small, wiry man appeared on foot. The fellow halted and stood waiting as he saw the rider on the roan approaching. Plainly, too, his attitude was hostile, for he held his hand near the gun on his right hip.

"Lookin' for somebody?" he asked sharply as Morgan halted.

"Reckon so," Wayne Morgan nodded carelessly. "Boss around?"

"Gage Brackton? Might be. But he ain't hirin' no extra hands in winter."

"Mebbe yuh better let me talk to Brackton hisself," said Morgan. "I ain't lookin' for a job."

"Norton!" roared a heavy voice as a short, stocky, middle-aged man stepped out onto the ranchhouse porch. "Who's that hombre?"

"Ain't told me, Boss," called Norton. He glanced at Morgan. "That's Brackton."

"Figgered so."

The outlaw playing cowboy was riding closer to the porch. He reined his roan and looked at the ranch owner. "Name's Morgan," he said. "Reckon yuh must be the owner of this spread."

"Ask him to come inside, Gage," said a dark-haired, middle-aged woman who had appeared in the open doorway. "He must be cold riding around in this weather."

"All right," Brackton said ungraciously. "Come inside, Morgan." And then to the Bar B *segundo:* "Take his hoss down to the barn, Norton."

MORGAN swung out of the saddle. The small man grabbed the reins of the roan, glaring at the new arrival as he started leading the horse toward the barn. It was obvious that Scott Norton did not relish the job he had just been given.

Climbing the steps of the porch, Morgan followed Brackton and the woman into the house. He found himself in a large and comfortable living room that extended across the whole front of the ranchhouse. A big sheet-iron stove in one corner was glowing, and the place was nicely heated. The furnishings were good and little touches spoke of women living in this house.

"I'm Gage Brackton," said the ranch owner. "And this is my sister, Jenny."

The dark-haired woman bowed and seated herself in a chair. Morgan stood with his hat in his hand.

A slender, pretty girl with light brown hair descended the stairs from the second floor of the ranchhouse. She halted in surprise as she saw the new arrival.

"This is my niece, Lucy, Mr. Morgan," said Jenny Brackton. "Do please sit down."

"Ain't shore I like makin' all this fuss over a stranger," Brackton said with a frown. "How do we know this here Morgan ain't a spy for them sheepmen across the river?"

"He doesn't look like a sheepman, Dad," said Lucy, with a smile for her father, that also included Wayne Morgan.

"Miss Lucy is right," Morgan said quietly. "I shore ain't a sheepman! Jest a wanderin' waddy that happened to drift into this part of the country."

"You are always suspecting people, Gage," said Jenny Brackton. She was a handsome woman, and apparently she had her brother completely cowed by her tongue which possibly could be caustic on occasion. "If you and Breeze Crane went about it right I'm sure you could learn who has been making all the trouble around here lately."

Lucy Brackton

"Ain't we been tryin'?" demanded Brackton. "But men keep on gittin' killed without us knowin' who is doin' it." The stocky rancher scowled. He looked tired and lines of worry were in his face. "But we'll git 'em, yuh can be shore of that!"

"If I am, it is more than you are," said his sister Jenny with a sniff. "You and Breeze Crane certainly act like you don't know what to do next."

"Oh, all right, Jenny," the ranchman said resignedly. "Have it yore own way." He frowned and walked to one of the windows. "Gettin' kinda close in here. Guess it won't hurt if we have a little air." He glanced at his sister as though expecting her to protest, but she said nothing. He drew up the lower sash of the window and the cold air blew into the room. "That's better."

A slender sandy-haired man in winter range clothes appeared from somewhere in the back of the house. A good-looking young waddy, he smiled at Lucy Brackton. In that flash Morgan saw the girl's eyes go soft as she glanced at the man in the doorway.

"Any special orders for tomorrow, Boss?" the sandy-haired cowboy asked.

"Oh, hello, Chuck." Brackton turned and saw him. "No, not now. If there are, I'll give 'em to yuh in the mornin'. . . . Morgan, this is my foreman, Chuck Russell." The rancher glared at his ramrod and it seemed as though some sort of a signal passed between the two men. "Morgan is a stranger. Claims he's jest driftin' through."

"And Gage acts like he is afraid Mr. Morgan might steal the family silver," said Miss Jenny.

"Don't reckon we need worry about that."

THOUGH the foreman was young, he was good judge of men. He advanced and took Morgan's hand in a firm, quick grasp.

"Howdy, Morgan."

"Glad to meet up with yuh, Russell," Wayne Morgan greeted, and he meant it.

He had no way of knowing that Chuck Russell had been the leader of the four men who had faced the herders that morning and had driven them back toward the river, but instinctively he like the young foreman of Brackton's spread from the moment he first saw him. Chuck Russell looked as if he had a level head on his shoulders.

A man who had just swung out of the saddle was hurrying up onto the porch of the ranchhouse. Morgan caught a glimpse of him through one of the windows that faced in that direction.

The man entered the house without knocking, brushing the snow from his clothing as he came in breezily. He was a big, broad-shouldered man with a strong, handsome face. He wore a black moustache and as he swept off his Stetson, Morgan saw that his hair was dark and thick.

"Breeze Crane!" exclaimed Brackton. "What's the matter? Yuh look like yuh got somethin' on yore mind."

It was true. The owner of the Circle C outfit had brought a suppressed atmosphere of tenseness into the room when he had entered. Both Miss Jenny Brackton and Lucy were watching the big man anxiously, waiting for him to speak. Brackton and Russell stood gazing at him.

"I have got somethin' on my mind," Crane said. His voice was deep and musical. "There's been trouble in Shelter Canyon!"

"This mornin' yuh mean?" demanded the foreman. "Had us a little run in with some jaspers with a flock of sheep—but ordered 'em back across the river."

"No, not that," Crane said jerkily. "There's been trouble at the canyon within the last hour!"

"What happened, Breeze?" demanded Brackton tensely.

"Was ridin' by there with some of my outfit about an hour ago," answered Crane. "We spotted some hombres deliberately shootin' and killin' yore stock."

"Left six men guardin' that herd," interrupted Chuck Russell. "Where was they, Crane?"

"Only seen four Bar B waddies there." The owner of the Circle C shook his head. "And they was fightin'. We drove off the hombres that was raisin' all the hell, but there ain't no tellin' when they'll be comin' back again." He scowled and rubbed his closely shaven chin with a right hand that bore an old knife scar across the back. "It's them damn sheepmen again, stirrin' up more trouble."

"We better get out to the canyon, pronto," rasped Brackton. He looked about him excitedly. "Can't never find anything in this house. Where's my coat and hat!"

"Here they are, Dad." Lucy had picked up a battered Stetson and a fleece-lined coat. She held the coat while her father slipped into it. "Be careful!"

"Always excitement around this place," murmured Miss Jenny. "Sometimes I wish I was still back East teaching school."

"I wish so, too," Brackton said under his breath, but only Wayne Mor-

gan heard him.

"Who's this man?" asked Crane, jerking his head at the tall stranger.

"Name's Morgan," said the unsuspected outlaw promptly. "Stranger in this part of the country."

"Oh!"

FOR a moment the gaze of the two men met and held, blue eyes peering into gray, but neither learned anything save that their wills were strong. The ranch owner turned away with a shrug of his shoulders as though dismissing Morgan as an unknown quantity for the time being.

Morgan started to go with them as Brackton, Russell and Crane went toward the door. The owner of the Bar B glanced back over his shoulder and frowned as he saw the tall Morgan following.

"Don't believe we'll need yore help, Morgan," he said shortly. "You stay here till we get back. Want to talk to yuh."

Morgan nodded. He had not expected them to be anxious to have him with them. He was willing enough to wait here at the ranch until they returned.

Brackton flung open the front door, with his foreman close behind him. Crane of the Circle C followed the other two men. The cold air blew across the porch as they stepped outside. And abruptly there came the clattering of guns!

With an oath Brackton leaped back through the door, crashing against Russell and Crane, nearly knocking them off their feet. Bullets thudded into the door as the owner of the Bar B hastily slammed it shut.

"Drygulchers!" snapped Crane, his voice low and tense. "They hit yuh, Gage?"

"No, come close though!"

Neither Lucy nor Miss Jenny had screamed, but the faces of the woman and the girl were white and anxious. They knew what a close call that had been.

Morgan, standing near the open window, went into swift action. A sudden leap took him over the sill and out onto the snow-covered ground at the side of the house. His guns were in his hands as he edged along the side wall toward the front of the place.

As he peered around the corner of the house he caught a glimpse of two men lurking behind a haystack not far from the front of the ranchhouse. Instantly, Morgan's heavy guns roared. One of the men went down as a bullet caught him. The other drygulcher fired back, the bullet plucking at the top of Wayne Morgan's right shoulder as it sped by.

He aimed carefully and fired for the third time. And the second man dropped, burrowing face downward in the snow as he died.

Brackton, Crane and Russell had flung open the front door of the ranchhouse. They stepped out onto the

[*Turn Page*]

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porch with their guns in their hands.

"Nice work, Morgan!" called Brackton. "Looks like yuh got both them sidewinders!"

"They musta followed me here!" Crane cried. "Figgered I'd warn yuh there was trouble at the canyon, and they aimed to down us all 'fore we could get there!" The owner of the Circle C ran toward the fallen men. "Get yore hosses!" he called back over his shoulder. "I'll stop and see if we know these hombres. Hurry up!"

"Right!" shouted Brackton. "Come on, Morgan, yuh've proved yore right to ride with us."

Quickly they reached the barn and as swiftly Brackton and Russell had a pair of fast horses saddled. Morgan backed his roan out of a stall where Norton had placed it, still wearing saddle and bridle.

THE short, wiry Norton himself appeared from the bunkhouse as they finished saddling.

"Trouble at Shelter Canyon, Norton," Brackton snapped to his *segundo*. "You stay here and see that the women folks are all right."

"Why don't yuh let Russell do that?" Norton glared at the foreman. "That's the kind of a job he'd like. Specially with Miss Lucy around."

"Shut up, Norton!" snapped Chuck Russell. "Yuh heard the boss' orders. That goes! You may be *segundo* around here, but I'm ramroddin' this spread!"

"Shore," growled Norton, with a vicious look at the bigger man. "And yuh ain't lettin' nobody forget it!"

"That'll be enough of this!" roared Brackton. "I'm tired of you two quarrelin' all of the time. If it don't stop I'll fire both of yuh!"

Norton lapsed into sullen silence and Chuck Russell said nothing further. The *segundo* opened the big doors of the barn and the three men led their horses out into the snow. Behind them Norton swung the doors shut.

Breeze Crane came riding up, mounted on a big bay horse. The four men headed their mounts northward toward the mountains.

"Jest like I thought," Crane said, as they rode along. "Them two jaspers Morgan killed was sheepmen. I've seen 'em workin' for John Murdock."

"Who's John Murdock?" asked Morgan.

"The man that's stirrin' up all the trouble around here!" growled Crane angrily.

"But we can't prove it," Brackton added bitterly.

"Can't even figger what he hopes to gain by it," remarked Chuck Russell. "It's a heap better sheep country across the river than it is here in the Big Hills Valley."

"Then why are the sheepmen tryin' to sneak their flocks across the ice to this side every chance they get?" demanded Breeze Crane. "Who's been drygulchin' us and our men? Who would gain anything by that but Murdock and the rest of them sheepmen? I tell yuh they're back of the whole thing!"

CHAPTER VII

Death in the Canyon

FOUR men rode steadily northward toward the mountains. They made no attempt to force their mounts to a brisk pace, for the deep snow made the going difficult for the horses. While it had stopped snowing it was still freezingly cold.

For a time there was no sound save the creaking of saddle leather and the crunching of the horses' hoofs as they broke through the white crusts.

Wayne Morgan rode silently beside Gage Brackton, a tall, broad-shouldered figure on his roan. Morgan's face was expressionless, and his keen blue eyes constantly searched the country about him. His eternal vigilance was a matter of habit, the life that he led both in his character of wandering waddy and

as the Masked Rider had taught him to be ever wary.

He knew that while these three men permitted him to ride with them because he had brought his guns into play in their defense that still they did not entirely trust him. After all he was a stranger, and it had been made clear that men who were not known, and even some who were, met with a certain amount of suspicion in the Big Hills Valley.

Occasionally he glanced at Brackton. He liked the owner of the Bar B outfit. While he was quick-tempered and distrustful, Gage Brackton was quite a man in the estimation of the Masked Rider.

That Brackton permitted himself to be dominated by his sister in minor things meant little in Morgan's opinion. He was sure that the ranch owner would have his own way when it came to vital decisions.

"Guess I sized yuh up wrong, Morgan," Brackton said finally. "But with what's been happenin' around here, I figgered it wasn't overly safe to put too much faith in strangers." And he added frankly: "Haven't made up my mind jest how far I'm trustin' yuh even yet."

"Ain't blamin' yuh none, Brackton," Morgan said quietly. "Always did admire a man that comes right out and speaks his mind."

"I usually do that." Brackton smiled. "To tell the truth it ain't usual for a waddy to come driftin' up this way in winter. Most of 'em heads south where it's more likely to be warm."

"That's true," said Morgan. "But me, I'm different."

"Uh-huh." The ranch owner nodded. "Kinda suspected that by the way yuh downed them two hombres at the ranch."

Crane and Chuck Russell were riding ahead of the other two men, and the Bar B foreman and the owner of Circle C were talking earnestly. Morgan gazed at them thoughtfully, remembering the blazing guns of the two men that he had killed at the ranch-

Scott Norton

house. His mind was filled with ideas that had not as yet crystallized clearly, but still seemed vital.

"Those two drygulchers at the ranch were pretty good shots for sheepmen," he remarked to Gage Brackton. "Never did run across many of 'em that was worth shucks with a gun."

Brackton glanced at him, and it was obvious from the expression on the face of the owner of the Bar B that what the tall, dark-haired stranger had just said had made him think.

"That's true," Brackton acknowledged. "They come mighty close to gittin' us when we first stepped out through the front door." He frowned. "Yuh're right, Morgan—damn good shootin' for sheepmen."

"Seein' as I'm kinda in on this trouble around here," Morgan said, half apologetically, "mebbe it would help me to get a clear picture of what's goin' on, if yuh was to tell me more about it."

"That's fair enough," said Brackton. "I will."

IN terse words he quickly outlined the general situation in the Big Hills Valley. He mentioned the Government notices and stressed the fact that the cattlemen had resented the or-

der and had grimly refused to leave their ranches. He told of the men who had been shot and killed from ambush. Waddies from both Crane's outfit and his own. He also stressed the way cattlemen had been forced to be constantly on the alert for trouble during the past two months. How they all rode with their guns ready, but that even so some of them had died from the bullets of the hidden killers.

"It's got so a man's life ain't safe nowhere in the whole valley," Brackton said gloomily. "And it's got worse since the river has been frozen solid."

"Meanin' yuh figure this John Murdock and the rest of the sheep ranchers must be back of all the trouble?" asked Morgan.

"I don't know," Brackton frankly admitted. "But it shore looks like it. I do know that sheep have been driftin' over into the valley." He scowled. "And all of my men have orders to drive them and their herders right back again. They're wantin' this land for grazin' their flocks—but they ain't goin' to get it!"

"And, so yuh've give orders to kill 'em if they don't go?"

As he voiced the question Morgan was remembering the massacre that he and Blue Hawk had seen that morning. A vision of the bullet-riddled sheep herders, the dead sheep and dogs lying in the blood stained snow swam before his eyes.

"No!" snapped Brackton, in sudden impatience. "My waddies ain't killers. They've got their orders not to start anything with the sheepmen less they are plumb forced into it."

The four riders had reached the mountains and were riding through the pass that was the entrance to Shelter Canyon. Towering walls loomed on either side of them—and the undercover Masked Rider suddenly noticed that it was ominously still.

There was no sound of cattle moving about in the snow and it was to this box-canyon that he had seen the cowboys driving the herd but a few hours ago.

As Crane and the Bar B foreman rode on into the canyon the owner of the Circle C suddenly held up his right arm in a signal to halt. Morgan and Brackton urged their mounts closer—and quickly drew rein.

"Good Gawd!" muttered Breeze Crane. "Look!"

Dead steers and horses were sprawled out in the snow. But that was not all. Here and there was a human figure lying motionless, gun still clutched in his hand. Morgan counted four dead men.

"My men and my stock," Brackton said bitterly. "All dead!" He cursed under his breath, a steady stream of profanity but one that did not relieve his feelings in the slightest degree. "This is shore hell!"

Chuck Russell was pale as death, himself. The dead men had been his close friends, he had lived in the bunkhouse with them, had given them their orders and been with them during most of their waking hours. They were part of his outfit.

"I'll get the murderin' sons that done this!" the foreman muttered savagely. "I'll down everyone of 'em myownself! I—I—" His voice rose in sudden hysteria.

"Chuck!" Brackton spoke sharply. "Ain't no use for yuh to get so worked up. I feel as bad about this as you do—and we'll get the sidewinders! But we better see jest what happened."

WAYNE MORGAN had quietly ridden on into the canyon and the other three men followed. It did not take them long to learn that all of the men who had been with the herd were dead.

"There was six men workin' this herd this mornin'," groaned Russell.

"That's what yuh told us," said Breeze Crane. "But remember only four of 'em was here when I passed by with some of my outfit and found the herd was bein' raided. Jest like I told yuh."

"That's right," said Brackton. "But what become of them other two men?"

"Claimed they wasn't hurt bad," answered Crane. "They rode with my outfit when the Circle C fellers went chasin' after the drygulchers."

"How many steers yuh figger was in this herd, Chuck?" asked the Bar B owner, glancing at his young foreman.

"About a hundred and fifty head," said Russell. "At least that was the tally when the boys started drivin' the herd toward the canyon."

"Then there's even more to this than we thought at first," Brackton said, his lips grim. "Ain't more than fifty dead cattle around here. The rest of the herd is missin'!"

"Rustlers!" exclaimed Breeze Crane. "That's a new angle, Gage—and it might explain a lot that's been goin' on!"

"Sounds so," said Morgan. He had been listening intently to all that the three men said. "But why would the sheepmen want to steal yore stock, Brackton? Ain't everybody had enough trouble over them Government orders without that sort of thing?"

"That's somethin' I can't answer," Brackton said, grimly serious. "Unless they figgered on gettin' revenge for their sheep bein' killed. All the same—"

He broke off abruptly as there came the crack of a rifle and a bullet whistled by his cheek.

"Hit for cover!" yelled Wayne Morgan.

His hands streaked for his guns as he shouted. He had wheeled his roan and was riding swiftly through the snow. It was not deep within the sheltered canyon. He headed toward the entrance of the big ravine, for it was there that he had caught a glimpse of a masked man with a rifle, hiding behind a big boulder.

Again the rifle roared, but the man with the Winchester was shooting wildly. Realizing that he had been located, he was frightened. Crane, Brackton and Russell had followed Morgan's lead and were riding as swiftly as possible toward the rocks that sheltered the drygulcher.

"Get him!" shouted Brackton.

The drygulcher leaped to his feet in sudden panic and started to run, zigzagging in and out among the boulders. That was the worst move that he could have made. Entrenched behind the big rock he would have been able to drive off the four mounted men, at least for a time, but now he was out in the open.

He realized his mistake when it was too late, for he halted abruptly and swung around. Brackton fired as the man in the mask raised his rifle, and sent a shot whizzing by the fellow's head. But the owner of the Bar B missed as his horse slipped in the snow. Breeze Crane abruptly spurred his horse ahead. His gun roared and the masked man fired again. But it was his last shot. The drygulcher dropped with a bullet in his heart.

"Good shot, Breeze!" shouted Brackton. "Yuh downed him, all right!"

THERE was little snow back among the boulders and the hoofs of the horses clattered on the hard ground as the four men rode closer to their fallen foe. They reined their mounts as they reached the dead man. The drygulcher had fallen face downward. It was Morgan who slid out of his saddle and turned the dead man over. He removed the mask from the face of the corpse.

"Good Gawd!" exclaimed Crane. "It's Sheriff Alton!"

"And he was tryin' to drygulch us!" muttered Brackton. "Always did think that lawman was crooked. Most of us around here has been wishin' his deputy, Tom Wells, had the job. There's an honest man!"

"That's right!" said Crane. "Never did think much of that lawman, Alton. Haven't liked the way he's been handing out them Government notices and orderin' us all to get out of this part of the country. He was right mean about it. Told him so the last time I seen him in town."

"There a town around here?" asked Morgan, who had been listening with interest.

"Shore," said Breeze Crane. "Two

of 'em. One way over at the western end of the valley. That's Gunshot, where we get all of our supplies. Then there's a town called Eagle Nest across the river back in the sheep country. Don't none of us go there!"

"Wonder why Alton was trying to drygulch us?" mused the owner of the Bar B. "Never did trust him any, but it seems like kind of a fool trick for a lawman to try."

"Might learn something if we searched him," Morgan said casually, as he stood in the snow beside the dead man.

"All right," said Brackton. "Go ahead."

Morgan swiftly went through the dead man's pockets. From the inside of the sheriff's coat the outlaw drew out a torn half of a legal-looking letter. He unfolded it and read all of it that remained.

"Look at this," he said, handing the torn half of the letter to Brackton as the owner of the Bar B sat in the saddle watching.

"Why, this is from the General Land Office of the United States," yelped Brackton. "It is addressed to Alton, and listen to this: 'You are ordered to investigate the counterfeit'—and then the rest of it has been torn off." He looked at Morgan. "Did yuh look good for the rest of this?"

Morgan nodded. "Yeah. That's all there was of it on him."

"Counterfeit, huh?" Chuck Russell said, and demanded: "Counterfeit what? Ain't heard of no counterfeit money round these parts. Don't see too much of it anyhow." He shook his head.

"Don't know," said Brackton. "But I've got a good idea myself that the rest of the letter might tell a heap about what made Alton try to drygulch us."

"Yuh're right, Gage!" exclaimed Breeze Crane. "Alton was tryin' to kill us before we found out somethin' or other about him that would finish him. Anyway, it was a fool play on his part."

"There won't be no trouble about you downin' the sheriff, Breeze," said Brackton. "He tried to kill all of us and it was self-defense on our part." He thrust the torn half of the letter into his pocket. "I'll jest keep this and turn it over to Tom Wells—seein' as how he's sheriff now and will want to investigate Alton's death." He glanced at his foreman. "We'll be headin' back to the ranch, Chuck. Got to send some of the outfit out here to bring in our men and the sheriff. Got to figger on buryin' 'em."

"No," Chuck Russell said soberly. "Can't leave 'em here. Reckon the other men are all back at the bunkhouse now. I've had 'em workin' with the cattle, making shore they was sheltered as much as possible ever since it started snowin' this mornin'."

"I better be gettin' back to my spread," said Crane. "Want to be shore my own stock is safe."

Morgan swung into saddle. The sky was still overcast and it had begun to snow again. The white flakes fell slowly, but it looked as if there would be more bad weather.

"Mebbe I better ride to yore spread with yuh, Crane," Morgan offered. "What with all the drygulchin' that's been goin' on it don't seem safe for a man to be ridin' alone."

"That's right, Breeze," Brackton quickly agreed. "Might be a good idea to have Morgan trail along with yuh."

So the four men rode out through the pass and separated. Brackton and Russell headed back toward the Bar B ranchhouse and Morgan and Crane rode toward the big man's spread.

CHAPTER VIII

John Murdock

CURIOSITY had prompted the Masked Rider to suggest he ride home with Crane. He did not doubt that the ranch owner was quite capable of protecting himself against ambushers without aid, but Morgan was anxious to learn just what Crane's outfit was like.

"The Bar B and yore outfit the only big ones in the valley?" he asked as he rode through the snow beside Crane.

"Jest about." The owner of Circle C nodded. "There are some other spreads, but me and Brackton has the only big ranches right in the valley."

"Reckon yuh must keep quite a lot of hands busy," Morgan remarked casually. "Looks like the valley is a right big place."

"Nearly fifty miles of it," said Crane. "I've got forty men workin' for me and Gage has about fifty in his outfit."

A rider had suddenly rounded a turn in the snow-covered trail they were following and was coming toward them. A broad-shouldered man in a black- and red-checked mackinaw and a dark Stetson.

"John Murdock!" snapped Crane as the rider drew nearer. "Yuh got yore nerve, Murdock!" he shouted. "What yuh doin' on our side of the river?"

Murdock reined his horse close to Crane. There was a sullen expression on the heavy face of the sheepmen's acknowledged leader. His hair beneath his hat was thick and shaggy, and he was a grimy-looking individual.

Morgan disliked him at first sight. There was a dangerous glitter in the fellow's eyes that were set too closely together, and his lips were curled in a half snarl that revealed yellow, tobacco-stained teeth.

"Mebbe I'm over on this side lookin' for the dirty skunks that killed sixteen of my herders and a flock of sheep this mornin'," he growled in a hoarse voice. "Yuh ain't tellin' me where to go, Crane."

"Yuh dirty skunk!" shouted Crane, glaring at the sheepman. "Don't get hard with me or I'll shore give yuh somethin' to think about!"

The horses of the two men were close together. Wayne Morgan was on Crane's left while the ranch owner had the leader of the sheepmen on his

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right, facing him. Abruptly Murdock lashed out with a gloved right fist and caught the Circle C owner squarely on the chin.

There was power and force behind the sheepman's blow. Crane reeled back and, knocked unconscious, slid out of the saddle to sprawl motionless in the snow beside his horse.

Morgan edged his roan around. And there was a gun in the right hand of the tall outlaw as he moved his mount closer to the shaggy-haired sheepman.

"Gunman, eh!" There was contempt in Murdock's hoarse voice. His lips twisted in a sneer as he gazed at the heavy Colt. "Mighta known any hombre ridin' with Breeze Crane wasn't man enough to fight with his fists!"

A swift flash of rage swept over Wayne Morgan at the scorn in the sheepman's tone. He thrust his gun back into the holster, his blue eyes hard and cold as the weather.

"Get off yore hoss!" he commanded angrily. "I can handle yuh with my bare hands!"

"Now yuh're talkin'!"

Murdock slid out of the saddle, ground-hitching his horse, also jerking the bridle of Crane's horse to ground-hitch it, too. Morgan did likewise with his roan.

"Didn't think yuh was man enough to take me up on it!" Murdock growled.

SWIFTLY they moved away from where the horses stood with Breeze Crane sprawled out in the snow beside them, unconscious from Murdock's blow. Apparently the owner of the Circle C was not as husky as he looked, could not take much punishment.

With the snowflakes falling all about them the two men faced each other. They were both big, though Murdock appeared a bit heavier than the Masked Rider.

"All right!" growled the sheepman. "Let's start!"

Abruptly he lunged forward. His gloved fist thumped against Wayne Morgan's chest. Morgan's sheepskin coat protected him, though, and he had rolled his body to avoid the full force of the blow.

His gauntlet-covered hands lashed out. A fist landed in Murdock's face and a second directly over his heart. But the heavy mackinaw protecting the sheepman prevented that body blow from doing much damage.

Murdock suddenly leaped up into the air and tried to come down on Morgan's toes with both his heavy boots. The outlaw jumped nimbly to one side. His right landed in Murdock's face with such force that it caught the sheepman off balance and knocked him flat into the snow.

But he was on his feet in an instant, rushing at Morgan with both arms lashing out wildly. Wayne Morgan tried to duck, but his feet slipped in the snow and Murdock caught him. The sheepman reached out and grabbed him by the throat. Snarling viciously, he brought up his right knee and caught Morgan in the stomach, just below the belt.

Morgan's right arm came down across the wrists of the hands clutching his throat, hit them like the descending blade of a guillotine. The force of the blow broke the sheepman's grip.

"Dirty fighter, eh?" Morgan gritted. "Anything goes!"

Murdock merely grunted as he tried to close in again. A right and a left from Morgan that got him full in the face forced him back—but the shaggy-haired man was game. His hat flew from his head to settle in the snow as he came on.

The moment Morgan was closer to him, Murdock again tried to kick. That was his mistake. For Morgan reached out swiftly and grabbed Murdock's foot just as it was being raised to fling out. The outlaw gave a sudden pull that threw Murdock off balance. And for a second time the leader of the sheepmen went tumbling into the snow.

Glancing to his right the Masked Rider saw that Breeze Crane was sitting up watching the fight. But Wayne Morgan's real attention was on his antagonist.

Murdock got lumberingly to his feet. Again he lunged. But the sheepman found that the air was suddenly filled with gloved fists. They pounded his face, thudded against his chin. And then he was falling—for the third and last time—and everything went black.

"Yuh knocked him out!" said Crane, a vast surprise in his voice. "The way he hit me I figgered he would give yuh a heap more trouble than that." He got to his feet, brushing off the snow.

"We leave him here?" Morgan asked calmly, as he walked over to his roan, picked up the reins and swung into saddle. "Reckon he'll come out of it in a few minutes."

"Shore," Crane said, as he too, mounted. "Looks like yuh learned him to keep on his side of the river after this."

THEY rode on toward Crane's spread. Once Wayne Morgan glanced back and saw that John Murdock had regained consciousness. The sheepman was on his feet, standing there glaring at the two disappearing horsemen.

"Figger on him back-shootin' us?" asked Crane, as he also glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't think so." Morgan shook his head. "But that jasper shore has somethin' on his mind."

"Shore." Crane laughed. "He's jest had a lickin' and he don't like it none!"

They rounded a bend in the trail, blotting off their view of the man behind them. Ahead two riders had appeared and were coming toward Morgan and Crane.

"Couple of my waddies," said the owner of Circle C. "They'll see I get home safe if yuh ain't anxious to make the ride in this weather, Morgan."

There was something in Crane's tone that made it plain to Wayne Morgan that he was not wanted. That suited him. He had been curious about Circle C spread, but that could wait until later. He found himself suddenly anxious to return to the Bar B. There were things about the encounter and the fist fight with the leader of the sheepmen that puzzled him—and he wanted more information from Brackton and Chuck Russell.

"I'll be leavin' yuh then," he said to Crane as he wheeled his horse. "Be seein' yuh."

"Shore!" called Crane. "And thanks!"

Morgan's right hand was close to the gun on his hip as he rode back through the snow. There was the possibility that Murdock might be waiting back along the trail to drygulch him.

Murdock was nowhere in sight, though, when Wayne Morgan reached the scene of his recent encounter with the big sheepman. He drew rein for a moment, but there was at first nothing to be seen but the marks in the snow that showed recent battle, and hoofprints; those of his own and Breeze Crane leading off in one direction, those of John Murdock in another.

Then suddenly something caught his keen eye.

Something whirling about in the wind and snow. A crumpled piece of paper it looked like. Morgan swung out of saddle and caught the flying paper. And his eyes narrowed speculatively as his first glance at it showed it to be the missing half of the letter that had been found on the dead sheriff, addressed to him. Grim-lipped Morgan read:

. . . Government orders to abandon their spreads that have been received by ranchers in the Big Hills Country. Report on this at once.

It was signed by a Government official.

"So that was it!" he exclaimed, as he thrust the paper into his pocket and climbed back into saddle. "Looks

like Murdock was workin' with the crooked sheriff. Mebbe Murdock had the important part of that letter and was holding it over Alton. Could be." He frowned heavily. "Can't figger all of it out yet, though."

Wayne Morgan's strong face wore a thoughtful expression as his roan crunched through the snow back along the trail. The situation in the Big Hills Valley puzzled him. On the surface it had all the appearance of a sheep and cattle war. The hatred of Brackton and Crane for John Murdock and the rest of the men across the river revealed that, but to Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider, that did not seem quite enough. Where did Alton and the fake Government notices fit in? For it was plain enough now they had been faked. Why?

A NUMBER of other things than that which had occurred during this stormy winter day still gave Morgan food for thought. Breeze Crane had said there were only the two big cow outfits in the valley; his own and Gage Brackton's. In that case to which spread had the band of horsemen belonged that had so ruthlessly killed the four sheepmen and their flock? Had they come from one of the smaller outfits? Funny, though, for any small outfit to keep so many men in the winter. Unless it was done deliberately, for a purpose.

That was a question the Masked Rider could not answer as yet. When he and Blue Hawk had battled some of those same riders down near the river bank Morgan had shot and killed two of them. Later when he and the Yaqui had returned to the spot in search of Blue Hawk's rifle the horsemen had departed, taking the bodies of their dead with them. Whoever they were, and from wherever they had come, plainly enough the live men did not want the dead ones to give them away.

"Still would like to know who them jaspers was waitin' for when they hid out there by the river," Morgan muttered. "Know it wasn't for Hawk and me. No reason for them to even figger on us comin' that way—if they'd even known we were in the country at all. Which they didn't."

He rounded the bend in the trail and discovered that there was no longer any trail of John Murdock in the snow. It was hard to say in which direction the leader of the sheepmen had ridden now for it was still snowing steadily and filling in any tracks that Murdock's horse had left.

The wind was at Morgan's back as he rode on toward the Bar B ranch. Snow powdered the mane and tail of his hammerhead roan and both horse and rider were cold and uncomfortable.

It was late afternoon, and in two or three more hours it would be night. From the way the snow was coming down, the drifts would be piled high by then, and the going more and more difficult.

"Reckon the sooner I get back to that trapper's cabin and meet Blue Hawk the better," Morgan ruminated thoughtfully. "All the same I'm headin' back to the Bar B first and have me a little talk with the folks on that spread. Want to show Brakton the rest of that Government letter. No point in the ranch owners worryin' about them Government orders if they were counterfeit." He was a little more thoughtful, then muttered: "Bet Miss Jenny and that girl might be able to tell me more about what's been goin' on than Brackton—if he weren't around."

CHAPTER IX

Miss Jenny Considers

MENTALLY Morgan had marked the general direction in which they had come when he had ridden along this way with Breeze Crane, although the trail was hidden by the snow. Landmarks were still fresh in his mind. The

trunk of a dead tree that looked like some strange black creature buried in the snow had been on his right as he had passed, going the other way, and now Morgan kept it on his left.

Ahead was a big boulder that stood beside the trail, and beyond this what had been a dense thicket in other seasons of the year but now was merely dried brush and leafless trees. Off to his left a hog back ridge loomed against the sky, not far away.

Riding on he came abreast of the big boulder. And it was at that moment that a rifle cracked from somewhere on the ridge. The bullet tore through the peak of Wayne Morgan's gray Stetson, and a moment later he had slid out of saddle limply as though he had been hit, and rolled behind the big boulder. Snow covered him from head to foot but that was of no importance now. He edged around the right side of the big rock, trying to catch a glimpse of the man who had fired at him from the ridge.

"Not much chance of gettin' him from here with a six-gun," he muttered disgustedly as he gazed at the long, snow-covered hill that looked like the back of a giant hog rising out of a trough. "And I was fool enough to leave my rifle in the saddle-boot on the hoss!"

The roan had moved on down into the place where the tree trunks and leafless branhes protected him to an extent from the wind and falling snow. He was too far away for Morgan to try and reach him without the risk of being brought down by a rifle bullet of the drygulcher on the hogback. There was at least thirty feet of open ground between the boulder and the edge of the woods. "There he is!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud.

A man on a dark-colored horse had appeared on the crest of the hill and was riding away through the snow. While he was too far off for Morgan to recognize him there was something familiar about him.

"Big man, looks like," mused the Masked Rider thoughtfully. "Might be Murdock, but I ain't shore of it."

He realized that the drygulcher had evidently thought him dead when he had fallen out of the saddle, but even so, apparently the man with the rifle was not risking being discovered by coming closer to assure himself that his shot had been fatal.

"That coyote ain't takin' no chances." Morgan got to his feet and brushed some of the snow off his clothing as the horseman disappeared on the other side of the ridge. "Shore would like to know who he was, and how come he was waitin' for me to come back along the trail."

Thoughtfully he made his way through the deep snow to where his roan stood placidly waiting. The horse turned his head and looked at him as he approached, but made no attempt to get away. [*Turn Page*]

"Yuh ain't no fool, are yuh, hoss?" Morgan mumbled as he brushed the snow off the leather and climbed into the saddle. "Yuh figure I'm gonna get some place where it's warm right soon and yuh're plumb willin' to take me there."

Half an hour later Morgan saw the buildings of the Bar B ranch looming ahead of him. Cattle had wandered in off the range and were huddled about the barn and other structures, seeking shelter from the steady falling snow.

IT had grown dark and the sky was filled with heavy, slate-colored clouds. Morgan rode the roan directly to the barn and swung stiffly out of the saddle. He was cold and his clothing was damp and soggy from the snow.

Opening the doors of the barn, he led his horse inside, unsaddled him and gave him a brisk rubdown with a burlap sack he found. This done, he placed the roan in a empty stall and left him nibbling at some hay.

Morgan noted that there were only a few horses in the big barn. Brackton, Russell, and the rest of the outfit, he decided, must have returned to the box-canyon to take care of their dead.

He closed the doors of the barn behind him and went up the hill to the ranchhouse. Scott Norton opened the front door and stepped out as Morgan came up on the porch. The wiry little man scowled as he recognized the stranger.

"So yuh're back," said the *segundo* in a disagreeable tone. "Thought we'd seen the last of yuh around here."

"Meanin' yuh was hopin' such was the case?" Morgan asked quietly.

"Why should I?" demanded Norton.

"Don't know," Morgan shrugged. "Unless yuh figger I ain't good for a guilty conscience or somethin'."

"Scott!" That was Miss Jenny Brackton calling from inside the house. "Don't stand there holding that door open. You want to freeze us all to death?"

Then she appeared in the open doorway behind Norton. A look of surprise swept over her face as she saw the stranger who had ridden away from the ranch with her brother and Breeze Crane a little over an hour ago.

"Mr. Morgan!" she said. "Gage—he's all right? Nothing has happened?"

"Not as far as I know, ma'am," Morgan said quickly. "I left Mr. Brackton and Chuck Russell headin' back here to get some of the men. There was some trouble at Shelter Canyon."

"Yes, I know about that." Jenny Brackton nodded. "But come in, please." She glared at Norton. "What's the matter with you, Scott? Can't you see he's wet and cold? And here you've been keeping him standing out here on the porch."

"Boss told me to stay here and protect you and Miss Lucy," the *segundo* muttered sullenly, as he glanced at Wayne Morgan. "And I don't believe in trustin' strangers."

Morgan merely smiled at him, then followed Miss Jenny into the big living room. At her suggestion he took off his sheepskin coat. He had already removed his hat. He stood close to the iron stove warming himself.

Miss Jenny seated herself in a comfortable chair and picked up some knitting from a table beside it. Norton stood awkwardly near the door. She glanced at him.

"Run along, Scott," she said. "I want to talk to Mr. Morgan."

THE little *segundo* frowned, then shrugged his shoulders and walked on through the living room, disappearing in the back of the house. There was no sign of Brackton's daughter.

"You're no range tramp," Miss Jenny said flatly, when she found herself alone with Morgan. Her keen gaze swept over his broad shoulders that the dark flannel shirt revealed, now that he had taken off his coat. She noticed the two guns thronged

low on his lean thighs. "And you've been fighting with someone since you left here."

"Right both times," said Morgan, with a cheerful smile. He liked the abrupt, straightforward manner of this woman. "Never claimed to be a grub-line rider. Ain't figgered out how yuh knew about the fist fightin' though."

"Your face is marked up a little," said Miss Jenny. "Fist marks I guess. Who was it?"

"John Murdock."

Some impulse he didn't quite understand made him tell her of the encounter that he and Breeze Crane had had with the leader of the sheepmen. She listened intently and silently until he had finished.

"Murdock is a very powerful man," she said. "He must be, to be able to knock Breeze Crane out of the saddle with one blow." She shook her head. "There are things going on around here that I don't understand, Mr. Morgan."

"First name's Wayne, ma'am," he said, with his friendly grin.

"All right, Wayne." She knitted silently for a moment. "Those two bushwhackers you killed are gone."

"Gone?" Morgan looked puzzled.

"I was looking out of a window just a little while before my brother and Chuck came back from the canyon to get our men," Miss Jenny said. "I saw four men sneak around the haystack, pick up the bodies and carry them away."

"Where was Norton?"

"I don't know." Miss Jenny's needles flashed in and out. "I didn't call him. There was no use of his trying to stop those men. If they wanted to take care of their own, let them."

Morgan fired, but the man had swung his horse around

"Yuh figger they were sheepmen?" asked Morgan.

"I wonder!" said Miss Jenny.

Morgan looked at her in surprise. She acted as though she knew far more than she intended to reveal. This middle-aged, dark-haired woman puzzled him. Even though she had seemed a shrew who ruled her brother by her sharp tongue when Morgan had first met her, obviously she possessed numerous good qualities.

The Masked Rider was sure that Jenny Brackton would use her head in time of danger. She had revealed that in her attitude toward the four men who had appeared and removed the bodies of the two killers that Morgan had shot. Another woman would have been in a state of terror when she learned that four dangerous men were outside the ranchhouse.

That the four men had been dangerous Morgan did not have the slightest doubt. They had been friends of the two drygulchers, and naturally were enemies of the Bar B outfit.

"Haven't you and Miss Lucy been kinda afraid stayin' here with only Norton for protection?" asked Morgan.

"Why should we be?" asked Miss Jenny. "Nothing has happened yet."

"TWO men tried to shoot yore brother and the rest of us when we stepped out of the front door a couple hours ago," Morgan pointed out. "There's been trouble at Shelter Canyon. Four of your outfit were shot and killed." He smiled. "And yuh say nothin' has happened."

"To Lucy and myself, I mean," said Miss Jenny. "Listen, Gage and I grew up out here in the West." She smiled. "I'd rather not say how many years ago that actually was, but we learned to face danger. Since then Gage has built up this spread until it is one of the biggest and best in this part of the country."

"Figgered so," Morgan remarked as she paused.

"He had to fight to do that. This was wilder country then than it is now. I spent a good many years in the East teaching school, but I knew what my brother was going through from his letters. Lucy's mother died when she was ten years old. Gage raised her during the years that followed and he did a fine job of it."

Probably from his habit of always being on the alert, Wayne Morgan glanced at the nearest window. Abruptly he leaped across the room, standing directly in front of the woman in the chair. There was a crash of breaking glass as a heavy object came flying into the room.

Morgan had his gun in his hand as he dashed across the room to the broken window and peered out. He fired as he caught a glimpse of a man running through the storm.

The man ducked around the haystack and disappeared. It would be useless to try and chase him, Morgan realized. Doubtlessly he had a horse hidden somewhere close by. But even as that thought came to him, from the front of the ranchhouse there came the booming of a .45.

"Norton!" exclaimed Morgan. "He must have spotted that hombre, too!"

A moment later the *segundo* was bursting in through the front door. He wore no coat or hat, but his gun was still in his hand.

"The sidewinder got away!" he growled. "Had a fast hoss behind the haystack."

Miss Jenny had calmly put down her knitting and picked up the object that had been thrown through the window. It was a rock a little larger than a man's fist, and a piece of paper was tied to it with a latigo string.

Removing the thin strip of leather Miss Jenny opened the paper. She frowned as she read the scrawled message aloud:

Leave the valley. This is going to be sheep country. Go while you are still alive.

"John Murdock wrote that!" exclaimed Norton. "I know it."

"Then he's a bigger fool than I think," snapped Miss Jenny Brackton.

"Yuh're right, Miss Jenny," Morgan said quickly. "That note puts the blame for all that's been happenin' around here square on Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen. He didn't look to me like a hombre that would make a mistake like that!"

CHAPTER X

Disrupted Intrigue

BRACKTON, Russell and the rest of the Bar B outfit arrived before Morgan decided to leave. There had been no further trouble at Shelter Canyon but the greater part of the herd was still missing and Brackton's outfit had been unable to find any trace of it.

"Jest disappeared in thin air, seems like," mourned the stocky rancher. "But we'll have a heap better chance of findin' out what happened to them critters after it stops snowin'."

Morgan moved forward, holding out a piece of crumpled paper. Surprised, Gage Brackton took it.

"Found this at the spot where me and John Murdock had a little run-in," he informed, as Brackton looked inquiringly at the half of the torn letter Morgan had found in the snow. "Don't look like yuh need to worry no longer about the Government orders to leave yore spread."

"Counterfeit Government orders!" exclaimed the owner of the Bar B, as he took in the meaning of the words before him. He glanced up keenly. "And yuh figger Murdock had this half of the paper on him, Morgan?"

"Looks that way." The waddy-outlaw nodded. "Found it right close to where I knocked him out."

"Then that's it!" said Brackton. "The whole thing's plain now! It was another trick on the part of Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen. They wanted to get us to leave the valley so's they could take it over for their flocks. Sheriff Alton was workin' with 'em. Handin' out them fake Government notices and tryin' to buy up our spreads for almost nothin'."

"Looks that way, Boss," Chuck Russell soberly agreed. "But them sheepmen got those notices, too. How come that?"

"Of course they did!" snapped Brackton. "But they ain't left, have they? Yes, sir, Murdock and the rest are back of the whole thing. It's another of their damn tricks—and Alton was workin' with 'em!"

"Seems so." Morgan repeated thoughtfully.

For a few moments longer the men talked, then Wayne Morgan decided to leave.

"Slackened up some now," announced Chuck Russell. "Thought it was gonna keep up all night, but it don't look so now."

"All the same it sounds plumb foolish for yuh to try to ride to Gunshot tonight, Morgan." Brackton studied the tall waddy and shook his head. He had taken it for granted that Morgan would be heading for the town. There seemed no other place for a stranger to ride for. "The town is twenty miles away, like we told you."

Morgan had no intention of heading for the cowtown in the western end of the valley, though he had deliberately given that impression in saying it was time for him to leave. To just ride casually away in weather such as this would create suspicion in the minds of the Bar B crowd.

But he couldn't tell them he planned to return to Jim Carew's cabin, and naturally he had no intention of mentioning Blue Hawk. If he had offered no explanation they would have been sure that what he really planned to do was cross the river and join the sheepmen, so town seemed the answer.

Brackton and the rest still did not dare entirely trust him. True, he had fought for them at every opportunity, but he was still a stranger—and not

one of them believed he was merely a wandering range tramp.

He almost wished that they suspected him of being a lawman, for that would enable him to move about the valley with more freedom, but apparently such an idea had not even entered the minds of either the two ranch owners, or of the men of their outfits.

"IF Mr. Morgan wants to go, then let him," said Jenny Brackton. She had been sitting silently knitting as she listened to the talk of the men who had gathered in the ranchhouse living room. "He knows what he is doing. I guess we all realize that!"

"That's right," Brackton agreed. He smiled at Morgan as the visitor picked up his sheepskin coat and put it on. "Though yuh're welcome to stay here if yuh wish, Morgan."

"Thanks," said Wayne Morgan. "But I'll be ridin'. Aim to drop around this way again right soon."

He got his roan out of the stall, saddled him and rode away. It was a clear, cold night. The gray storm clouds had passed and stars were in the sky.

There was no sound save the crunching of the snow beneath the horse's hoofs as Wayne Morgan rode northward through the rolling country of the Big Hills Valley that was covered by a mantle of white. It was a placid ride and he had almost reached the trapper cabin when a figure on a pinto loomed out of the shadows. Instinctively Morgan's hand went for the gun on his right hip as he flipped the reins into his left. Then he chuckled softly as he recognized the horseman.

"Fooled me for a minute when I saw yore pinto, Hawk," he said. "I'm so much more used to seein' yuh ridin' the gray."

The Yaqui turned his mount and the two men rode on toward Carew's cabin side by side.

"Trouble over on the other side of the river, too, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "Cattlemen raiding over there and killing men and sheep. Sheepmen very mad about it."

"Can't blame 'em for that," the outlaw agreed. "And yuh say cattlemen are doin' all this killin'?"

"So the herders tell me," answered the Yaqui. "Some of them are Indians. We talk."

"How many sheep ranches are near here on the other side of the river?" asked the Masked Rider, then as quickly changed his mind. "Never mind," he said. "We'll talk when we get to Carew's cabin. Gotta get into my Masked Rider duds pronto."

The two men halted their horses in a sheltered place and swiftly Morgan was changing into the rig of the black-clad outlaw. As was his usual habit, he had been carrying it in the saddle-roll on his roan.

The black fleece-lined coat replaced the brown one. Over this went the flowing dark cloak. The gray Stetson was exchanged for the black sombrero, and the black mask hid the upper part of the tall man's face.

Once more in costume, the Masked Rider placed the hat and coat of "Morgan" in the saddle-roll and tied it back in place on the cantle of his kak. He swung into saddle and he and Blue Hawk rode on.

Reaching the trapper's cabin, they placed the horses in the leanto.

"Don't unsaddle," said the black-clad outlaw. "Figger we'll mebbe have to do a little ridin' yet tonight. I aim to have the Masked Rider see if he can't put a stop to some of this killin' that's been goin' on around here."

They circled around to the front of the log building. The door of the cabin was standing open, and it was dark inside the place.

"That's funny," remarked the Masked Rider. "Looks like Carew ain't here."

THE Yaqui stepped in through the open door. During the time that they had been in the cabin with the bearded Carew Blue Hawk had registered the exact location of everything

in the place in his mind. He was able now to find a box of matches on a shelf, and held the tiny flame to the wick of an oil lamp that stood on a table. The interior of the cabin brightened with yellow light.

"He's not here," the Masked Rider said, surprised, as he glanced around.

Then from beneath the bunk came a thumping. The outlaw leaned down and peered beneath the bunk. He uttered a startled exclamation as he saw Carew lying there, bound and gagged.

Quickly the Masked Rider pulled the gray-bearded trapper from beneath the bunk. With his sheath knife, Blue Hawk cut the ropes that held Carew's wrists, then removed a gag.

"What happened to yuh, Carew?" demanded the Masked Rider, as he helped the man to his bunk.

"Two fellers came here durin' the storm," Carew chattered. "One of them was John Murdock, the leader of the sheepmen. I didn't know the other man. Never seen him before. They knocked me out with a gun barrel, then tied me up. Didn't hit me as hard as they thought, and I could hear 'em talkin' after they pushed me under the bunk."

"What did they say?" asked the outlaw eagerly.

"Murdock said that him and the rest of the sheepmen planned to bring all of their flocks across the river during this winter weather while they could travel over the ice."

"What good would that do 'em?" the Masked Rider wondered.

"Well, from what Murdock said they aim to hide their flocks back here in the mountains and beyond till spring. Then they'll drive 'em all down into the valley and jest take over the place."

"So that's it," said the Masked Rider thoughtfully. "Sounds like kind of a wild plan to me—but mebbe Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen could get away with it. Looks like they know the fake government notices won't work and they are getting desperate."

"Said they was plannin' a big sheep drive tonight," stated Carew.

"I better warn Brackton and Crane about what's goin' to happen tonight," the black-clad man promptly announced. "Hawk, you stay here with Carew and see that nothin' more don't happen to him."

"*Si*, Senor." The Yaqui nodded.

Hurriedly the Masked Rider got his roan and rode through the snow as swiftly as possible to the mountain cave where he and Blue Hawk had left Midnight and the Indian's gray horse. He needed the big black horse, even if his roan was not already familiar to the ranchers and cowboys. The stallion would be fresh after so long a rest and able to travel fast and far.

Half an hour later the Masked Rider was moving swiftly through the night, mounted on his superb black stallion. He circled around so that he could ride close to the river on his way to the Bar B. That was necessary, for he was anxious to learn if Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen had already started driving their flocks across the ice.

Reaching the river bank, he halted the stallion and for a moment sat tensely watching. Men were moving about out on the ice-covered river and their actions puzzled him.

"What the devil are them hombres doin'?" he muttered. "They ain't working with sheep."

Groups of men were dragging small square boxes and placing them at various spots on the ice. The man on the stallion was hidden in the shadows of some trees on the river bank but in the starlight the men on the ice were clearly visible to him.

FOR a full twenty minutes the Masked Rider watched. Then the men on the river drifted away, leaving the boxes standing on the ice, so covered with loose snow that they were not readily seen.

Waiting until he was sure that the group had actually departed, had gone back across the river into the sheep

country, the Masked Rider swung out of the saddle and ventured out onto the ice. Making his way to the nearest of the boxes he brushed away the snow. He could just make out the big red letters on the box in the dim light of the stars. They read:

DYNAMITE!

A wave of horror swept over the Masked Rider. The whole diabolical plan was clear to him now. Murdock and the other man at the trapper's cabin had known that Carew was not unconscious, that he could overhear their conversation.

That was what they had wanted him to do! They had expected Carew to try and warn the two ranch owners of the plans of the sheepmen!

And the Masked Rider well knew what that would mean. Once the cattlemen learned of the sheepmen's plans they and their men would at once head for the river to drive back the sheep and their herders. And as soon as they ventured out onto the ice Murdock and the others would set off the boxes of dynamite, blow up the ice and the men on it!

"Must be detonators planted in these boxes," muttered the Masked Rider. "Only needs one bullet to hit right to blow 'em all up."

His first thought was to ride in a hurry to warn the ranch owners, but the next moment he realized that Murdock's crowd would not depend entirely upon Carew rushing away to warn Brackton and Crane that sheep were to be driven across that night. The sheepmen would find other ways to drop hints of their supposed plans, so that their real ones would work out.

There were many ways in which this might be accomplished. One of the herders might deliberately permit himself to be caught on the wrong side of the river. Once he had been taken to Brackton at the Bar B or to Crane at the Circle C he would "talk." Make them think that he did so to save his own hide.

"Best thing for me to try and do right now," the Masked Rider considered, "is get the detonators out of these boxes so there won't be as much chance of the dynamite going off if a bullet does hit it."

To his relief he found that the cover of the box he was examining was not nailed down. He drew it off and saw that the dynamite detonator caps were

in the top of the box. Beneath them were the short greasy-looking sticks of dynamite.

He picked up one of the dynamite caps. And his hand had not moved a full inch upward when there came the sharp crack of a rifle from the south side of the river. He jumped as the bullet whistled by his head. But he did not lose his head. His left hand streaked for his gun.

At any moment a bullet from the rifle might hit the caps in the box and blow him into bits. But he was willing to risk that. Gingerly he put down the detonator cap and started racing across the ice toward the north bank. He made no attempt to return the fire of the man with the rifle for the range was too far for a six-gun and he knew it.

AGAIN he heard the rifle crack, the sound carrying clearly over the ice. A bullet struck the ice beneath his left boot. There was so much force to the .45 slug that it knocked the Masked Rider off his feet.

He sprawled at full length on the ice, and for a moment lay there, cursing softly. But he had not been hurt. He got to his feet and moved on swiftly toward the bank.

It seemed like a long time before he reached the river bank, but he made it, climbed up a slight rise to where he had left his black stallion. Midnight was still patiently standing beneath the trees and the outlaw in the black mask breathed a sigh of relief as he swung into the saddle. He had a chance now. Never did he feel so able to face any odds as when astride Midnight.

"I better head for the Bar B pronto and try to stop Brackton and his men before they git out on the river," was his instant decision.

He urged Midnight to as fast a pace as the big black horse was able to travel through the deep snow. Leaving the river bank, he headed in a direct line for the Bar B.

The Masked Rider realized that there was no time to try and find the trail that led to the ranch. He had to take the most direct route, across country. There was no telling just where the Bar B outfit might attempt to cross the river, for it extended for miles in either direction and there was no way of discovering just where Murdock would start driving a flock of sheep across.

That the sheepmen would at least go through the motions of attempting to get some of the little woolly creatures across merely as bait to bring the cattlemen out onto the ice, the Masked Rider did not doubt.

He topped a snow-covered rise, and cursed as he saw a band of riders coming toward him from the foot of the hill. But some instinctive warning of danger told him that the approaching horsemen were not the Bar B outfit.

The man who rode a little in the lead of the riders shouted as he saw the black-clad figure on the stallion. Flame flashed as a gun roared, and a bullet tore through the outlaw's fluttering black cloak.

But in that breath his own guns were in his hands, weapons of death and destruction, as he galloped through the snow toward the approaching men. That his own approach was deadly was signaled when one of the riders slid out of the saddle as a bullet from the Masked Rider's gun caught him.

Lead whistled all about him. But the Masked Rider's eyes were cold and grim as they peered through the holes in the black cloth that hid the upper part of his face. He was triggering

[*Turn Page*]

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his heavy Colts steadily, making every shot count.

Another man went down, and a third. A horse slipped in the snow as his rider tried to turn him too quickly. The horse went down, piling up the mounts of two other men behind it. One of the riders went flying through the air to burrow into the white crusts like a human snow-plow and suffocate there.

One bullet clipped a lock of hair from Midnight's mane, and the stallion snorted and shook his head, but he was not gun shy. Both horse and rider had heard bullets whistling about them like angry hornets far too many times for that sound to terrify them.

A SLUG streaked across the upper part of the Masked Rider's left arm, burned a hole in the sleeve of the black fleece-lined coat. But it did not crease the flesh beneath.

His guns were still roaring—and the men who battled him were suffering from the hail of those well placed bullets.

Still another man died sitting upright in the saddle. Blood stained the snow and the three horses that had fallen were in such a tangle that they were threshing around wildly, making matters all the more difficult for their embattled riders.

"Get him!" furiously shouted the attackers. "Down the son! Ride him down!"

But the Masked Rider swept by like the roaring north wind that had driven the storm before it a few hours ago. Before the men had a chance to recover from the havoc that he had caused he had disappeared into the shadows of a wooded tract like a black ghost.

They made no attempt to chase after him. For they had experienced the blazing fury of his death-dealing guns.

"The Masked Rider!" one of the tottering horsemen muttered dazedly. "With him here in the valley there's gonna be hell to pay!"

CHAPTER XI

Ice Battle

AS he rode on toward the Bar B the Masked Rider swiftly reloaded his guns and thrust them back into their holsters. More than once he glanced back over his shoulder expecting to find his foes in close pursuit, but saw no further sign of the band of horsemen with whom he had been battling.

"They shore got enough of me in a hurry," he chuckled. "I'd like to know jest who those jaspers were. Figger likely they must be the same bunch that killed them sheep herders and their flocks this mornin'. Them hombres didn't shoot nor ride like sheepmen. I'm certain of that much anyway."

Still, if those riders had not been part of Murdock's crowd, who were they? That was the question that lingered in the mind of the Masked Rider. For he was positive they could not have been part of Brackton's or Crane's outfits.

A thought struck him then. Brackton and Chuck Russell had discovered that part of the Bar B herd that had been driven to Shelter Canyon that morning was missing. That might mean that there were rustlers in the Big Hills Valley. It might explain these mysterious riders.

"Nothin' to prevent a bunch of rustlers from hidin' out back in the mountains," he told himself, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "And if they are that might explain plenty of things that has been goin' on. The drygulchin' and all the rest of it."

Lights gleaming ahead notified him that he had reached the Bar B ranch. It also dawned that it would be difficult for him to explain the presence of the Masked Rider in the valley.

For he was certain that Brackton and his family had not the slightest idea that the mysterious Robin Hood

outlaw was anywhere nearby.

"Proddy as they are now after all that's happened," he muttered, "they're likely to start shootin' first and ask questions afterwards." He smiled grimly. "Can't blame 'em none!"

He rode close to the porch when he reached the front of the ranchhouse.

"Brackton!" he called loudly. "Hey, Brackton, come out here!"

The door was flung open and Jenny Brackton appeared. She peered fearlessly out into the night, but uttered a startled cry as she saw the black-clad figure on the big horse.

"Who are you?" she called anxiously. "What do you want?"

"Folks call me the Masked Rider," answered the outlaw in a hoarse voice, one far different from the soft drawling tones of Wayne Morgan. "I'm a friend. Came to warn Brackton that there's danger at the river!"

"Danger at the river!" exclaimed Miss Jenny. "Gage has just gone there and taken most of the men with him! They learned that the sheepmen planned to drive a big flock across tonight."

"Was afraid of that!" said the Masked Rider swiftly. "How long have they been gone?"

"Why, about fifteen or twenty minutes," informed Jenny Brackton. "What's wrong?"

"No time to tell yuh now." The Masked Rider shook his head as he wheeled his horse and started away. "I've got to try and head 'em off!"

HE glanced back once, saw Jenny Brackton outlined in the light from the room behind her as she stood there watching him. Maybe she was too fearless, he thought quickly. She presented far too good a target if some of the drygulchers should still be lurking around the ranch. He was conscious of a distinct feeling of relief when she entered the house and closed the door after her. He didn't look back again as he urged his stallion on through the snow at all possible speed. Midnight was lunging on as swiftly as he could, but the big black horse was unable to show more than half the speed of which he was capable on hard, dry ground. The snow, nearly two feet deep in places, held him back.

"Know its right hard goin', Midnight," the black-clad horseman encouraged. "But we've jest got to find Brackton and his outfit as soon as we can!"

Horse and rider had almost reached the river when the Masked Rider heard what he had been fearing he would hear. A loud explosion from somewhere ahead! For an instant the sky was filled with a weird blue and yellow glare. Then came the ominous sound of cracking ice, hard on the heels of the booming.

The Masked Rider cursed. So it had happened! Murdock and his men had started blowing up the dynamite! The would-be rescuer had arrived too late. Brackton and Crane and their outfits must already be out on the ice!

Midnight plowed on through the snow and as the black stallion reached the river bank a scene that might have been part of a fantastic nightmare met the Masked Rider's tense gaze. A group of horsemen were desperately trying to get away from the spot where the explosion of one of the dynamite-loaded boxes had blown a big hole in the ice. Horses were slipping and sliding. Riders cursed and shouted. From the south bank of the river, over in the sheep territory, men were firing at the milling waddies on the ice.

Flashes of flame came from the darkness, and the cracking of the guns formed a steady rhythm like the thumping of the drums of savages. The men on the sheepmen's side of the river were concentrating on the other boxes of dynamite, but lead was also flying dangerously lose to the cattlemen.

Again came a deafening explosion as a well aimed rifle bullet hit a detonator in one of the boxes and blew up

the whole thing. Ice and water went flying high into the air.

The bright flash revealed the stark, tense faces of the waddies as they frantically urged their mounts to a place of safety. With the second explosion the ice broke with a roar and one horse and rider, too near the spot, went plunging into the freezing water. They disappeared beneath the surface and did not come up again, for the surrent swiftly swept them under the thick ice not yet broken.

Horses' hoofs clattered and slipped on the ice. Men shouted livid oaths as they herded back to the north bank as swiftly as they could make it.

Gage Brackton and Chuck Russell rode with the men, the strong voice of the stocky ranch owner booming out as he shouted words of encouragement to his waddies.

"Head for the shore on our side, boys!" he yelled. "We'll give 'em a taste of their own medicine soon as we get to the bank. Don't risk this ice. Keep movin'!"

NO one heard him, no one was even listening. But he was shouting to strengthen his own courage as well as that of his men.

He cursed again, as a helpless feeling of defeat suddenly swept over him. For a withering blast of gun fire had suddenly come from the bank toward which he and his men had been heading. They were trapped, figuratively, between two fires! With no way to get off the ice that was cracking and breaking up beneath the feet of their horses except to plunge head-on into gun fire.

Guns were roaring and flashing on the north side of the river just as they had been on the south. As one horse fell, pinning its rider beneath it, the waddy uttered a high, shrill cry of pain and terror. Another Bar B man fell out of the saddle, his body sliding limply across the ice like a rag doll tossed in a corner.

"No use, Boss," Russell shouted hoarsely as he rode beside Brackton. "They've got us!" There was no fear in the foreman's voice, simply resignation, but he had not given up supinely. His gun was still in his hand as he fired at the flashes of flame on the dark bank, and he gritted: "But we'll die fightin'!"

From behind them then, came a third explosion. The ice trembled and cracked afresh beneath the sliding feet of the cattlemen's mounts. A man cried out as his horse bucked and flung him into a pool of black water that had suddenly appeared.

Back on the shore the Masked Rider abruptly wheeled his black stallion, horror flooding him at the realization of what was happening.

"That bunch of riders that I met!" he cried aloud, as he urged Midnight on through the snow, circling around behind the men who were lined up on the bank. "Here's where they were headin'!"

He managed to reach a position in back of the attacking forces on the north bank without being seen. Ahead of him men were moving about, shadowy, eerie shapes in the darkness. The roaring of guns was loud in his ears, and the acrid tang of powder filled the air. Occasionally a man's face was revealed in the flash from his gun as he fired.

The Masked Rider's eyes glittered through the holes in the mask. Never had the weight and feel of his heavy guns been more comforting than they were now as he snatched them out of the holsters in that lightninglike double draw that had brought him fame. Hate rankled in his heart; bitter seething hate for these diabolical killers who had planned this ruthless death-trap for the cattlemen.

On toward the river bank he rode, the black stallion traveling at a walk, his magnificent head held high, the wind blowing through his thick mane. Then Midnight's rider was close enough! His guns started roaring. The Colt in his right hand flamed as one of the men glanced back and saw him. That was the last thing that man

ever saw in this world, for he slumped to the ground with a bullet in his head.

"Get yore hosses, men!" shouted the leader of the killers who had been hidden on the bank. "Let's get out of here, pronto!"

Guns flashed all about the Masked Rider as he came on inexorably. For as the men had discovered that someone was behind them, some had turned to face their new foe. Others raced for their horses and swung into saddle.

These men did not like the idea of being caught in the same sort of a trap that they had set the cattlemen. From the ice there came a triumphant shout from Brackton and his men as they sensed, rather than saw, what was happening.

"LET 'em have it!" shouted the Bar B owner.

His gun barked as he urged his horse closer to the bank. A wild cowboy yell tore from his throat as he saw the ambushers rushing away in sudden panic.

"Drive out them polecats!"

On the bank, a black-clad rider's guns were booming. The heavy Colts bucked in his hands from the recoil as he fired steadily—again and again. Another and another of the drygulchers on the shore went down.

Then abruptly from the brush and trees along the river bank a group of horsemen loomed into view. And they came at the moment the Masked Rider had taken respite in which to reload his smoking guns.

"There he is!" shouted a horseman as the men who had been keeping the Bar B waddies from reaching the north bank dashed out into the open. "Down that masked jasper!"

Hastily the Masked Rider thrust the cartridges into the chambers of the gun in his right hand. He had dropped his left gun back in the holster while he reloaded.

And he fully realized, as the horsemen whirled toward him, that never had he been closer to death. They were firing as they rode, plunging on. Bullets whistled about him, tearing through his cloak. Midnight snorted as a slug tore a lock of hair from his mane.

Then from spots in the darkness of the dim, starlighted night rifles roared on either side of the Masked Rider. One of the approaching riders slid out of the saddle as a bullet caught him in the heart.

"He ain't alone!" shouted another of the attacking riders. "Let's get out of here!"

But just as the man swung his horse, a bullet caught the animal. His front legs buckled, flinging the rider headfirst into the snow as he went down.

The two rifles were still cracking—and the band of riders abandoned any further thought of fighting the black-clad horseman when the gun in the Masked Rider's right hand also started booming. They swept westward, urging their horses to a killing pace as the bullets from the rifles behind the outlaw, and his own six-gun speeded their departure. In a few moments they had disappeared into the darkness.

Up the bank and through the brush came what was left of the Bar B crew, with Brackton and Russell in the lead. They had seen what was happening, and they knew the black-clad man on the big stallion was a friend.

The two hidden rifles had fallen silent as the drygulchers disappeared. The Masked Rider was anxious to know who had been handling those guns in his defense, yet he knew that it would be useless to look for them in the darkness unless they wanted to be found.

"Hey, you! We're friends!" shouted Brackton as the stocky ranch owner rode closer to the Masked Rider. His attitude was tense. He and his men were badly shaken by what they had gone through during the last half hour. "Want to talk to yuh!"

Behind Brackton came the rest of the Bar B outfit. Thirty men who still lived, though some of them rode

slumped down in their saddles, their faces drawn and white. Many of them had been wounded.

THE black-clad outlaw sat placidly waiting, his slender, deft fingers thrusting fresh shells into the chambers of his guns with amazing speed. He placed the reloaded Colts back into their holsters as Brackton reined his horse beside him. For an instant the owner of the Bar B peeped at the masked face that was shadowed by the broad brim of the black sombrero, keen eyes trying to discover the identity of the figure in the fluttering cloak.

"Who are yuh?" he asked finally, his voice hoarse and tired. There was blood on his left cheek from a bullet that had nicked his ear. "What's yore name?"

"Folks call me the Masked Rider," the outlaw answered calmly.

He sensed the tenseness of these men, knew that what they had just gone through made them reluctant to trust anyone. They knew that he had battled for them and driven away their foes, but they did not know why, and they wanted him to explain.

"The Masked Rider!" repeated Brackton loudly. He wanted his men to hear. And a murmur of wonder and awe swept through the group as they did hear. "What I been hearin' about yuh's plumb right," Brackton said. "There ain't another man woulda had the nerve to go up against them sidewinders that had us trapped like you did. Yuh saved our lives, ain't a doubt of it!"

These men of the Bar B outfit were salty, seasoned range riders. Brackton's simple statement had expressed the gratitude of both himself and his waddies for the Masked Rider's aid far more than any fulsome praise he might have voiced.

"Glad I happened to get here in time to do some good," said the Masked Rider. "Learned that there was gonna be trouble for the cattlemen around here tonight. Went to the Bar B to warn yuh but you had gone." He spoke in that deep hoarse voice that so little resembled Wayne Morgan's. "I figgered—"

He broke off abruptly to listen. From somewhere in the dark night

to the westward came the barking of guns again. Steady firing that continued for a moment or two, then ceased abruptly.

Then from that direction the tall shadows of mounted men loomed in the pale starlight. Brackton and his men cursed, tired hands reaching for their guns, but they did not draw. The riders who approached, were riding with weapons holstered.

And there was something familiar about the big man on the bay horse who rode in the lead of the approaching cavalcade.

"Brackton!" that lead rider shouted. "It's Crane!"

Relief swept over the Bar B men. Their tension relaxed as Breeze Crane and his men drew near.

The big man halted his horse close to Brackton and his voice was excited as he spoke.

"We jest run into a bunch of riders that started to give us a fight!" he shouted. "But when me and the boys answered with lead they hit for cover."

His men halted their mounts close to Brackton's waddies.

"There's been hell to pay out on the river," mourned Brackton.

"Yes, I know." Crane nodded. "Heard the ice bein' blown up and rounded up every one of my men. Sorry we couldn't get here sooner, but some of them damn sheepmen tried to raid my spread. Burned up one of my haystacks before we drove them off."

"Wouldn't have found us here if it hadn't been for this hombre," said the owner of the Bar B. He—"

Gage Brackton broke off abruptly with a startled gasp. The black-clad horseman was no longer there. During the time it had taken Crane and the rest of his outfit to reach the Bar B men the Masked Rider had quietly disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER XII

Clash in the Line Cabin

HEAVY gray clouds, rolling across the sky, were swiftly blotting out the stars, and it was growing colder. The wind had risen in the north-east and there was a biting tang in the air.

The Masked Rider realized that another snow storm was coming, as he rode through the night in the direction of Jim Carew's cabin. He was anxious to reach shelter, for the black stallion had been forced to a swift pace for a long time tonight and needed rest.

The black-clad outlaw held his mount down to a walk as they headed northward toward the Big Hills. There was no need for haste now. Brackton and his outfit were safe and the turmoil on the river had ceased entirely.

The gunmen on the south bank had ceased firing at the planted boxes of dynamite as soon as they discovered that the Bar B men had reached the opposite shore. In spots the ice still cracked and broke, to drop into the black water beneath it, but mile after mile of the frozen surface remained intact.

"Blowin' up the ice looked like a foolish move on the part of the sheepmen if they figgered on gettin' their sheep across," mused the Masked Rider, as he rode along. "But I reckon they knew what they were doin' all right."

THOUGHTS raced through his brain, thoughts that analyzed and pigeonholed facts, for this man had gained his reputation not only because he was a fighter, but because of his ability to get to the bottom of the situations which confronted him.

Everything that had happened since he had ridden into the Big Hills Valley was vivid in his mind. Little things as well as big assumed importance in his estimation. Details that would have seemed trifling to others less astute. But to him they formed connecting links in the strongly forged chain of death-fraught events.

The drygulchers who had been killing off Crane and Brackton's men, the slaughter of the sheepmen and their flock, the attempt to kill the three men at the Bar B as they stepped out of the ranchhouse to head for Shelter Canyon—all were part of a definite pattern in the Masked Rider's mind.

To him, there had been a definite motivation behind everything that had occurred.

He was pretty sure that Murdock and the man with the leader of the sheepmen had deliberately let the elderly trapper overhear their plans so that the cattlemen might be caught on the ice—as they had been. He was even more positive about it now than he had been at first.

But Carew had been unable to inform Brackton and Crane in regard to what he had overheard. When the Masked Rider had arrived at the Bar B the ranch owner's sister had told him that Brackton and the men had learned that there was trouble at the river and had gone there.

"Shore would like to know who got word to the Bar B outfit," the Masked Rider told himself thoughtfully. "Figger when I learn that I'll really know something."

Before he had traveled far the stars were completely hidden by the thick gray clouds, and it had begun to snow. The white flakes were coming down steadily and it looked as if they would so continue for a long time.

Just as he reached the foot of the mountains the outlaw discovered a man plodding slowly along ahead of him. The fellow swayed as he walked, and he carried a rifle in one hand.

"CAREW!" exclaimed the Masked Rider, halting his horse close to the trapper. "What the devil yuh doin' way out here?"

"Indian found me when I left the cabin to warn the ranchers," Carew said wearily. "Took me close to the river bank, ridin' double when we heard all the shootin' down there."

"Told yuh when I left I would warn the ranchers myself," said the outlaw, a note of impatience in his voice. This man had been through a lot and he needed rest, and yet here he was again roaming around in the snow. "There wasn't no need for yuh to come out."

"Me and the Indian's rifles was considerable help to yuh down by the river a little while ago," Carew drawled.

"Then you and the Yaqui was handlin' them guns!" exclaimed the Masked Rider. "Yuh're right, Carew! Yuh both helped plenty and I'm grateful!"

"Forget it," growled the trapper. "Waren't nothin'." He swayed weakly and grabbed hold of the outlaw's saddle.

The Masked Rider reached down and lifted the elderly man up on the kak in front of him. Jim Carew was close to total exhaustion for he had walked at least two miles through the snow.

"Thanks," he said in a weary voice. "Shore got tired of walkin'."

The snow was coming down faster, and as they rode on the outlaw discovered that he could not see more than a few feet ahead of him. The bitter cold wind blew the flakes into the faces of the two men, but the Masked Rider continued heading directly into the teeth of the storm. He had remembered a line-camp shack belonging to one of the cow outfits, not far away, and was heading for this.

The bearded trapper had finally been able to fork the saddle, and the outlaw rode behind him on the back of the big stallion. Midnight found the double weight an added burden but the black horse valiantly kept right on going.

Finally the Masked Rider slid off the horse's back and walked in front of the stallion as they pressed on through the storm. It was not necessary for him to lead Midnight by the reins, for the black horse followed willingly.

Carew was clinging to the saddle horn with one hand while with the other he clutched his rifle. His eyes were closed and he was only half conscious.

The Masked Rider's heart leaped as he caught a glimpse of a dim light burning somewhere ahead. They must have reached the line-camp shack at last!

Yet as he drew closer a feeling of danger stole over him. Something was wrong, and he did not know exactly what. He halted; so did Midnight. Then he discovered that Carew was slumped down in the saddle, unconscious.

"Stay here, Midnight," said the Masked Rider, dropping the reins down in front of the stallion's head. "I'm gonna take a look around."

He left the horse and the unconscious man and went on through the storm. As he came closer to the light, he saw that the line-camp shack was evidently occupied, as he had guessed. The light gleamed through a window that was half open and, coming closer, the Masked Rider heard the sound of men's voices. He listened tensely, for the feeling of danger still lingered.

"THE Masked Rider, eh!" said a gruff voice, apparently continuing a conversation. "Shore I've heard a lot of talk about him—quite a hombre some folks says. But he's an outlaw, ain't he? There ain't no gettin' around that. And there's places where they're offerin' rewards for him dead or alive."

The black-clad man frowned as he listened. What had just been said was quite true. There were lawmen scattered throughout the West who blamed the evil deeds of other riders of the owlhoot trails on the Robin Hood outlaw. Because of this rewards had been offered for his capture dead or alive.

"That's right," said another voice. "And if he was to come around where I was I'd down him first and ask questions afterwards."

"Me, too," growled the first speaker.

The Masked Rider silently moved away, heading back through the storm to where he had left Carew and Midnight. He was in a difficult position. He had to get the trapper to shelter as swiftly as possible, but now he knew that for him to appear as the Masked Rider before those men in the line cabin would be courting death.

Yet on the other hand to assume the identity of Wayne Morgan now would be risky, too, for there was a chance Carew already had guessed that the black-clad horseman and the wandering waddy were one and the same man.

"All the same I gotta take a chance on it," the outlaw decided. "Ain't no other way unless we keep plowin' through the storm until we reach Carew's cabin. That ain't such a good idea. He's likely to be froze, and me and Midnight, too, 'fore we get there."

With numbed fingers he fumbled with the tie-ropes that held his saddle-bags in place on the cantle. The trapper was still unconscious. That was just as well, for he did not wish Carew to see the change in identity that he planned.

He dragged out the brown sheepskin-lined coat and the gray Stetson. With these in his hands he moved away, out of sight of the man on the horse. It was Morgan who reappeared a few moments later and hastily stuffed the black clothing and sombrero into the saddle-bags. He lashed them back into place with the wet ropes.

"Let's go, Midnight," he said softly.

No longer masked, he advanced through the storm until he reached the line shack. The black horse with his unconscious rider had followed close behind him. Morgan found a shed behind the cabin, built so that it was well protected from the wind.

Three blanket-covered horses were already in the shed. He led the stallion inside, then lifted Carew down out of the kak. He did not attempt to unsaddle Midnight, for there might be need for the black in a hurry.

With Carew flung across his left shoulder, the tall outlaw advanced toward the line shack, circling around until he reached the door.

He thrust the door open with his foot. As he stepped inside carrying the unconscious trapper one of the three hard-faced men in the shack uttered a curse, dragging out his gun.

Morgan's right arm was free, and his Colt appeared in his hand as the man fired. The outlaw's gun roared as a bullet thudded into the door close to his head and the man at the table died as Morgan's bullet caught him in the heart.

"HOLD it!" snapped Morgan, his Colt covering the other two

men as they grabbed for their guns. "I don't know why that hombre started this—but he got what was comin' to him."

"Who the hell are you?" demanded one of the other men.

Morgan's blue eyes narrowed as he recognized the third man. It was Scott Norton, the Bar B *segundo*.

"Ask him!" The outlaw nodded toward the wiry little man.

"Says his name is Morgan," growled Norton, glaring at the tall, dark-haired man. "Got the whole outfit believin' he's jest a drifter, but I figger he's an undercover man for the N. and W.

Morgan gently lowered the unconscious trapper to the floor of the cabin, but he never took his eyes off the two men before him, and his gun was ready in his right hand.

There was something familiar about the two initials that Norton had mentioned, but at the moment Morgan could not remember just what. He studied the face of the man with Norton and did not like him. Cold eyes in a thin, evil face glared at him. There was no doubt in the Masked Rider's mind that both this man and the one he had shot were gunmen.

"Mind tellin' me what this is all about, Norton?" he asked, his voice deceptively soft. "Figger this must be a Bar B line shack. But that don't tell me why the dead jasper tried to down me."

"In the first place this ain't no Bar B line camp," growled the thin-faced man before Norton could answer. "It belongs to the Circle C. In the second place, after all the drygulchin' that's been goin' on around this range yuh can't blame us for bein' proddy when you come bustin' in here like yuh did."

"Might he somethin' to what yuh say," Morgan admitted, then he frowned. "All the same I ain't convinced." He decided on a shot in the dark. "Mebbe you jaspers jest don't like N. and W. men!"

The thin man scowled and glanced at Norton. The Bar B *segundo* shook his head as though afraid his companion would say too much.

"Admittin' yuh're a N. and W. man, Morgan?" asked Norton.

"No," said the outlaw firmly. "To be right truthful I never even heard of the outfit."

"Ain't an outfit—"

"Shut up, Shad!" shouted Norton. "Yuh talk too much!"

"Nice to know Crane and Brackton's outfits are jest one big happy family," Morgan drawled, with a grin. He considered the thin-faced man. "Shad, huh? Me, I like trout better!"

"Why, why yuh — " stammered Shad.

"Excitable gent, ain't he?" The gun in Morgan's hand suddenly grew menacing. "Shuck yore irons, hombres!"

For an instant Norton and Shad only glared, but there was something in the cold gaze of those blue eyes that made the two men obey. Reluctantly they drew their guns out of the holsters and let them slide to the floor of the shack.

"Yuh'll have a hard time explainin' this to Brackton and Crane, I'm shore of that, Morgan," said Norton bitterly.

"Might be," the outlaw calmly agreed. "But this way I figger I got a better chance to live to tell 'em about it."

HE dropped his own gun back into the holster on his right leg, then picked up Carew. He placed the trapper on one of the two bunks in the shack.

Norton and Shad watched every move with the dangerous intentness of two jungle beasts regarding their trainer. Waiting for one false move upon his part that would give them the opportunity to leap on him.

Morgan paid no attention to the two men, and his very fearlessness bewildered them. He muttered a curse in an undertone as he looked closer at the unconscious man, then suddenly he drew back Carew's coat. The shirt beneath was clotted with dried blood.

The trapper had been wounded by a bullet.

"The fool!" muttered Morgan. "Wounded and he didn't tell me!"

He knew that the two men were moving behind him. But some lingering fear of this tall, dark-haired stranger prevented them from snatching up their guns from the floor. Instead, they were edging along the wall of the shack toward the door.

Morgan did not turn as he stood with his back to them. If they wanted to make their escape in the storm he was willing to let them go. That would simplify matters for him. Holding Norton and Shad prisoners was becoming complicated when he had other things to do.

He had not even turned when they reached the door and leaped outside. But Morgan swung around as they disappeared. A sudden thought had struck him. They would head for the shed to get their horses and would find the black stallion there. They must not take Midnight with them!

On the instant a shrill whistle that carried above the wailing of the wind issued from the outlaw's lips. A signal that Midnight had been trained to answer. The big horse would come to his master when he heard that whistle.

Morgan stepped outside of the shack and repeated the call. He heard a shout from the direction of the shed. A moment later the form of the big horse loomed in the falling snow as he came galloping around the corner of the cabin.

"Good boy, Midnight!" the outlaw called as the stallion came to a stop beside him. "They ain't takin' you away, are they?"

For a few minutes Morgan stood there waiting, then two riders swept by, weird, half seen figures in the thick curtain of falling snow. Their horses' hoofs made no sound. They might have been ghost horsemen as they disappeared into the night.

Morgan breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the last of Norton and Shad through the snow. He led Midnight back to the shed and left the horse there, then hurried back into the line shack.

"Got to get Carew to the Bar B where he can have that wound treated," he told himself firmly. "And the sooner the better."

He glanced down at the dead man by the table.

"Besides I gotta do a heap of explainin' to Brackton and Crane about what happened here. Ain't no sayin' what lies Norton and that other hombre will tell!"

CHAPTER XIII

Shot Through the Window

WHEN Wayne Morgan reached the Bar B it was nearly midnight. With two long poles, a blanket from the shack and ropes he had built an Indian *travois*. The ends of the poles had been lashed together in front of the pommel of the roan which he was now riding, for he had been able to ride through the storm on Midnight, find the cave and get a fresh horse there.

The poles had then been spread out on either side of the horse's flanks, so that they formed a makeshift sort of shafts. The ends dragged on the ground and between these Morgan had tied the wounded man heavily wrapped in blankets from the shack. It had formed an excellent way of transporting the trapper through the storm.

Now Morgan was in the big living room of the ranchhouse, talking to Gage Brackton. Carew had been settled in one of the bedrooms, his wound cleaned and dressed. He was resting comfortably, for the bullet had gone clean through the upper part of his chest, and probing for the lead slug had not been necessary.

"Yuh say yuh found the trapper and took him to the Circle-C line camp?"

asked Brackton, thoughtfully. "And then when yuh come into the place one of Crane's waddies tried to down yuh?"

"That's the way it happened," Morgan asserted.

The two men were alone. Both Miss Jenny and Lucy had gone to bed. The unsuspected outlaw slowly rolled a quirly, and waited for the ranch owner to speak.

"Ain't the way Norton tells it," said Brackton after a little. "He claims yuh come bustin' into the shack with a gun in yore hand, like yuh was lookin' for trouble."

"I found it!" Morgan said drily.

"Norton claims the hombre yuh killed accused yuh of workin' with the sheepmen. Said he could prove it and so yuh killed him."

"Yore *segundo* is a liar," stated Morgan flatly.

"Might be." The owner of the Bar B appeared willing to consider the situation from all angles. "All the same Breeze Crane ain't gonna like yuh killin' one of his men thataway."

"Reckon so."

Morgan struck a match and lighted his brown paper cigarette. He was gazing idly at the snow piling up on the lower ledge of a half open window across the room.

"Still haven't figgered why yuh drew down on Norton and Shad and made 'em shuck their guns," said Brackton.

"If one of three jaspers tried to kill yuh, would yuh trust the other two any too far?" asked Morgan.

"No." The stocky rancher frowned and shook his head. "I wouldn't."

Brackton glanced up as Chuck Russell appeared from the back of the house with Norton close behind him. The *segundo* scowled at Morgan.

"Got somethin' to tell yuh, Boss," Norton said surlily. "And I'm speakin' right out where Chuck Russell can hear it."

"What is it?" asked Brackton.

"'Bout an hour ago I seen Russell here saddle up and ride out into the storm," said the small, wiry Norton. "Got me kinda curious so I followed him."

"KIND of sneakin' trick you would do." The foreman glared at Norton. "I was aimin' to ride to Shelter Canyon and see if the men there who are looking for rest of the herd was all right."

"Mebbe yuh was, but yuh never got there," snarled Norton. "I seen yuh meet a rider out in the storm and talk to him."

"That's a lie!" snapped Russell. "I didn't meet up with nobody. Found the storm was worse'n I thought so I turned back."

"Followed the rider Russell was talkin' to out there," went on the *segundo* as though he had not been interrupted. "Got close enough to see him good. It was John Murdock!"

"Murdock!" exclaimed Brackton. He looked anxiously from one man to the other as if trying to decide which was telling the truth. "What about it, Chuck?"

"Still say Norton is lyin'," said the young foreman firmly. "It's up to yuh, Boss, whose word yuh want to take."

"Mebbe yuh both better let me think this thing over," said Brackton. "Norton, yuh realize yuh've been makin' some mighty serious accusations, don't yuh?"

"Jest been tellin' yuh what I seen," said the *segundo* shortly.

"If Norton would lie about me then I'm believin' he'd do the same thing about Russell," Morgan broke in unexpectedly. Chuck Russell shot him a grateful glance.

"Thanks, Morgan," he said, as he turned away. "All right, Boss. I'm headin' for the bunkhouse. You tell us what yuh decide in the mornin'." The foreman glanced at Norton. "Come on, hombre, yuh're goin' with me. I ain't takin' a chance of gettin' shot in the back!"

"Mebbe I'd better." Norton bared his teeth in a wolfish sneer. "Yuh might be waitin' outside to down me

when I go to turn in."

The two men departed side by side, watching each other warily.

"Yuh ever hear of the N. and W., Mr. Brackton?" asked Morgan, when the two men had gone.

"Shore." Brackton nodded. "Northern and Western Railroad. There was talk of them runnin' a line through this valley last summer. Ain't heard nothin' more about it, so I guess they changed their minds. Or mebbe they ain't got around to it yet."

"A railroad, eh?" Morgan mused. "I see. Jest heard something about the N. and W. mentioned, and wondered what it was they was talkin' about." He smiled. "I thought it was a cow outfit."

"Well, it ain't."

Things were coming back into the outlaw's mind now. The way in which Norton had accused him of being an undercover man working for the N. & W. The stake that his foot had struck against when he and Blue Hawk had been examining the dead sheepmen and their flock. The stake that had been branded N. & W.

The railroad presented a new angle to the situation in the Big Hills Valley. Though as yet he could not see how there was any connection between the Northern & Western and the trouble that sheepmen and cattlemen had been having.

He had heard of the railroad. But it was too big and prosperous for there to be any need for it to stir up trouble in order to gain a right of way through this part of the country. Morgan was sure it was nothing like that.

Yet why should the possibility that he might be an investigator for the railroad have worried Norton and Shad as it obviously had done. What connection had those two with the N. & W?

IT would be more than useless, he was assured, for him to attempt to question the *segundo*. Norton would be sure to lie, or refuse to talk at all. A different idea struck him then.

"Who told yuh that the sheepmen were plannin' to drive a big flock of sheep across the river tonight?" he asked Brackton.

"Why, Norton," Brackton admitted. "He come ridin' in and said he'd been down by the river and seen some of Murdock's men startin' to drive a bunch of woollies across."

"And led you and the outfit right into a trap," said Morgan, and added quickly, for he did not want Brackton to know he had any first-hand knowledge of the affair: "I heard about it. Was Norton with yuh?"

"No." Gage Brackton frowned. "He stayed here to saddle up a fresh hoss. Don't think he ever did show up, though I ain't certain. So much happenin' I didn't have no time to check up on the men with me."

The stocky rancher rose from his chair and started to pace the floor. He was nervous and excited, and was showing the strain.

"Damn it, Morgan, this thing is gettin' me!" he said crisply. "First it was drygulchers pickin' off the men ridin' the range—and now look at all that's happened today! Them four men killed in the canyon and half of the herd missing, the rest shot. Then the way them sheepmen tried to trap us on the river, and near done it."

"Did yuh know that a flock of sheep and sixteen herders was killed on this side of the river this mornin'?" asked Wayne Morgan.

"Yes." Brackton nodded. "Heard about that—and I'm shore that it wasn't my men or Crane's that done it. I tell yuh I don't understand what it is all about! Good Lord, man, do yuh realize that it ain't only me and my men that's in danger, but my daughter and my sister, too!"

"I know." Morgan nodded soberly. "And yuh better keep somebody on guard here at the ranch all the time. I figger this trouble ain't over yet."

The stairs that led to the second floor of the ranchhouse were located directly in the back of the big living room. Morgan had been keeping an

eye on them, more or less, and now suddenly he was conscious that someone was standing at the head of the stairs, listening. It was dark up there but he caught a vague glimpse of a white face. And he was certain that it was either Miss Jenny or Lucy who stood there.

"Of course I'll keep some of them men on guard here all of the time," Brackton said. "Night and day. I ain't takin' no risks of Lucy or Jenny being shot if they step outside of the house. I will—"

"Gage—the window!"

Jenny Brackton was calling from the top of the stairs, her voice tense and shrill.

Both men whirled toward the half open window. Morgan's hands streaked for his guns as he twisted around. He saw the glitter of a long blue gun barrel and a fist that was thrust in through the opening. It was aimed straight at Brackton, Morgan realized, as he heard the click of a cocked hammer.

From the head of the stairs a gun roared and the long-barreled Colt in the window vanished without being fired.

Morgan reached the window with his guns ready in his hands. The falling snow blotted out the black shape that was dashing away from the house but he fired, even though it was useless. For the man who had tried to kill Gage Brackton was gone.

WAYNE MORGAN swung around from the window. A little cloud of blue smoke was rising toward the oil lamp that hung on a chain in the center of the room. The acrid smell of gunpowder lingered in the damp air. In the corner the low-burning coals in the sheet-iron stove glowed redly like a bloodshot eye.

Jenny Brackton was descending the stairs, her tall form clad in a blanket robe. Her long black hair was plaited in two braids that hung down her back, and the yellow light cast a bright glow on the .38 that she held in her competent right hand.

Then from the second floor came the light patter of feet and Lucy's voice crying out anxiously.

"Dad, are you all right? I heard shots."

"It's all right, Lucy." Miss Jenny's voice carried clearly, and there was a soothing calmness in it. "No one was hurt."

"Jenny!" Brackton looked at her dazedly. "You saved me! You shot and kept the man at the window from firin'!"

"Someone has to take care of things around this house!" Miss Jenny placed her gun on a table as she seated herself in her favorite chair. She looked at the .38 as though it was a strange object that she had never seen before. "It's a good thing Father taught us both how to shoot when we were children, Gage."

"Shore is, Miss Jenny." There was frank admiration in Morgan's eyes as he looked at her. He had never seen a woman quite like this one. He had already decided that her caustic tongue was merely a defense, a shield that protected her from a world that had hurt her in some way. "And good shootin' it was!"

Lucy came rushing down the stairs, her eyes wide and a little frightened. A look of relief swept over her young face as she saw that her father was unharmed.

"What happened?" she demanded.

Gage Brackton swiftly told her. The girl blushed and drew the robe she was wearing closer about her as she became aware that someone else was present—the tall, dark-haired stranger who had been there before.

"A man with a gun at the window." she cried. "Oh, Dad, when will this all stop?"

"Not until we convince John Murdock and the rest of his killers that they gotta keep out of this valley," said the owner of the Bar B with decisiveness.

The front door of the ranchhouse was thrust open and Chuck Russell

and Scott Norton entered. They were both fully dressed and excited.

"Heard shots from the bunkhouse and come a-runnin'," panted the foreman. "What's happened?"

"He wasn't in the bunkhouse!' cried Norton. "I'm shore of it."

"I'm tired of yore lies, Norton." Russell's fists were clenched. Only with effort was he holding himself in check. "I've been tryin' to not make any ruckus, 'cause I knew the boss had enough to worry him—but this is plumb gettin' too much to stand!"

"I ain't afraid of yuh, Russell!" The *segundo* glared defiantly. "Never have been. Yuh can shout and say that I'm lyin' all yuh want—but everything I've said about yuh's been the truth!" He spat out his accusation swiftly, as if time counted. "If Mr. Brackton wants to trust you instead of me—that's all right. But I'm gonna have my say and yuh can't stop me!"

"This ain't my fight," Morgan interrupted, quickly stepping between the two men, "but there's a few questions that I'd like to ask yuh, Norton."

"You keep out of this!" snarled the *segundo*. "It ain't none of yore business!"

"I'm not so shore of that," Wayne Morgan said firmly. "Yuh lied to Brackton about me and I figger yuh're doin' the same thing about Chuck Russell. Like I already said." His voice was hard. "Yuh're talkin' now—but yuh better talk fast and straight, Norton!"

CHAPTER XIV

Suspicion

NORTON hesitated and licked his lips. There was something about the keen, piercing eyes of this tall stranger that made the little *segundo* suddenly afraid.

He had been lying, creating fabrications out of whole cloth, in order to get Chuck Russell in wrong. Norton hated the young foreman of the Bar B with all the bitter vindictiveness of his warped soul.

For two years he had coveted Chuck Russell's job. Norton was the type of man who gloried in authority. To be in a position to dominate those about him, to issue orders they had to obey, meant much to him. It would salve any slights that life had handed him because of his inconsequence.

True, he already was the *segundo* of the outfit, and so a boss of the men under Russell. But the literal meaning of the Spanish word *segundo* was second in command and that was not enough. Scott Norton wanted to be first in everything.

If Gage Brackton had assumed the position of ramrod of his own outfit, as did some of the cattle owners throughout the West, then the title of *segundo* would have possessed more power than it did here on the Bar B. As it was Norton was nothing more than a straw boss under Chuck Russell's supervision, and it rankled. Now he thought he saw a chance to change all that, and he meant to take it, no matter how much lying it involved. For Scott Norton was the caliber of man who would casually swear a man's life away, if it served his own purpose.

"Yuh say yuh followed Russell out into the storm when he rode away from the ranch?" Morgan's voice cut sharply through a moment of silence. "That yuh saw him meet another rider?"

"That's right." Norton nodded sullenly.

Wayne Morgan bent on the *segundo* a stern, accusing gaze. "For the last three hours it's been snowin' so hard yuh couldn't a seen Russell unless yuh was within ten feet of him. If yuh'd come that close he'd a shore seen you, too."

"Morgan's right!" exclaimed the sandy-haired foreman. "I couldn't see only a few feet ahead of me. That's why I turned back."

Brackton was listening intently, as

were Lucy and Jenny. The rancher's sister had picked up her knitting and the needles flashed in the light. The girl had seated herself in a chair, her robe drawn close about her slender form and her gaze fixed anxiously on Chuck Russell. No doubt about her love of the foreman. It showed in every move and expression as she watched and listened.

"Yuh couldn't see but a few feet ahead of yuh," repeated Morgan relentlessly. "And yet Norton was able to recognize the rider yuh're supposed to have met and knew it was John Murdock!"

"Well, it looked like Murdock," Norton said slowly.

Morgan's gaze bent sternly on the *segundo*. "You were the one that told Brackton yuh'd seen the sheepmen startin' to drive a big flock across the river tonight, Norton." Every accusing word was clear and sharp. "Isn't that true?"

"I did see 'em!" Norton was nervous and frightened. "I tell yuh I did!"

"It was too dark for yuh to see all the way across the river tonight, Norton." Morgan's voice grew hard, uncompromising. He bit out sharply: "How much did Murdock pay yuh to come here with that story?"

"I didn't—he said—" The *segundo* broke off abruptly, a wave of horror sweeping over his face as he realized how much he had tacitly admitted; that at least something had passed between him and the big leader of the sheepmen. Wayne Morgan leaped at it.

"So yuh did sell out yore outfit!" unspeakable scorn was in his voice. "Then it was you that threw that rock through the window with the note on it tellin' the Bracktons to get out of the country. That musta been yore own idea. Murdock's too smart for any button trick like that."

"I didn't!" Norton's protest rose to a wail. "I fired at the hombre that threw that rock! Just as he was ridin' away."

"Yuh mean yuh fired yore gun to make it look like yuh was tryin' to down somebody," snapped Morgan. "Funny yuh should be out in front of the house right then. Wasn't it kinda cold out there? Yuh're lyin', Norton. Yuh sold out yore outfit and yuh know it!"

"Yuh sneakin' coyote!" r o a r e d Brackton as he took a menacing step toward his cowering *segundo*. "Damn if yuh don't deserve to be lynched!"

Suddenly Norton gripped his fast-failing courage. His hand flew to his gun and he snatched it out. His eyes were glittering as he leaped back, the long blue barrel aiming directly at Lucy Brackton, sitting tensely in her chair.

"Touch me and the gal gets it!" he snarled.

As if suddenly paralyzed, the three men before him stood stockstill, their hands close to their guns, but suspended in mid-air. If the small man had covered them with his gun those gun-draws would have been completed. But not now. Lucy Brackton was in danger.

In sudden terror at being found out, Norton was as vicious and desperate as a cornered rat. His intention was plain in his eyes. He would shoot Lucy if forced to.

For a hushed instant the three men stood tense and motionless. Miss Jenny had abruptly stopped knitting. Lucy's face was paper white. Terror was in her eyes as she stared, as if half fascinated, at the menacing barrel of the gun in Norton's hand.

Then slowly the *segundo* began to edge back across the room toward the front door. In the deadly quiet and electric tension in that room he seemed to take hours to reach it, but it was actually only a moment. His left hand reached behind him, caught the latch of the door and drew it open.

A blast of cold air and a swirl of snow swept through. Just for a breath. Then the door closed with a crash and Norton had disappeared.

"Chuck—wait!"

Lucy raced for the young foreman,

wailing, as he dashed toward the door, gun in hand. Russell's bootheels ground to a jerked stop as he glanced back over his shoulder.

"She's right!" cried Brackton. "Don't open the door, Chuck. He can see yuh in the light—but you can't see him."

"He's got to get a hoss!"

Wayne Morgan turned and ran back toward the rear of the ranchhouse. He could go out the back way and head for the barn.

Stumbling through the darkness that shrouded the big kitchen, he found the back door and flung it open. Wind-driven snow lashed at his face as he lunged out into the storm. His guns were up, ready, as he pounded toward the barn.

His boots sank deep into snow, retarding him. A curtain of white loomed all about him, forcing him to move cautiously, for all his need of haste. He bumped into a hard flat surface that was the front wall of the barn before he realized he was near it. He edged his way along, seeking the big doors.

From somewhere ahead of him came the rasping of hinges as a door opened. Snow muffling his footsteps, he moved forward swiftly. A horse's head seemed floating through the air, unattached to the animal's body. It came into view so close to Morgan that he leaped to one side.

He fired as he caught a vague glimpse of the man in the saddle, but the sudden leap had thrown him off balance. The bullet went wild. A gun in the horseman's hand roared, a slug thudding into the wood of the barn door.

Then the rider was gone, completely blotted out by the obscuring curtain of white. Morgan caught the door and drew it closed from the inside. Because of an overhanging roof above the big doors of the barn where the snow had not piled so high, it had been easy for Norton to swing back the door after he had saddled his horse and escaped.

Well, Norton was gone. There was little, if any, chance of overtaking him in this night snowstorm. And now Wayne Morgan had other things on his mind.

He was anxious to leave the Bar B and get back to the trapper's cabin where he had planned to meet Blue Hawk. So much had happened since the two men had parted that it seemed a long time ago to the Masked Rider. Yet it had actually been only a few hours.

He heard a crunching of snow, and Brackton and Russell appeared. Their guns were in their hands as they opened the door and entered the barn. The light from an oil lantern burning in the stable caught the reflection of steel. Evidently Norton had lighted the lantern so he could see to saddle a horse.

"He get away?" Brackton demanded.

Morgan nodded glumly. "Yes. I tried to stop him, but couldn't. His hoss near trampled me down."

"Think we better saddle up and try and follow him, Boss?" Russell looked anxiously at the stocky owner of the Bar B.

"No sense to that." Brackton shrugged helplessly. "Ain't a dawg's chance of findin' him in this storm. Anyhow, he'll head across the river into the sheep country. He'll be welcome there, after the way he's been workin' for Murdock under cover."

"Wonder if he has been?" Morgan said, voicing a nagging thought.

"What yuh mean?" Brackton's expression was as puzzled as that of his surprised foreman. "I don't get it."

"Tell yuh more when I'm certain," Morgan said thoughtfully, his eyes studying the faces of the two men. "Listen, you two want to clear up all this trouble around here, don't yuh?"

"Ain't that kind of a silly question?" demanded Brackton.

"Sounds so to me," Russell agreed.

"All right then." For a moment Morgan's lips tightened. "I'm makin' a suggestion. Mebbe yuh ain't gonna

even consider it, but I figger it'll help some."

"What is it?" asked Brackton.

"Fire Chuck!" said Morgan promptly.

"Yuh crazy?" The owner of the Bar B glared at the tall, dark-haired man who could make such a startling and senseless suggestion.

"There's no sense to that, Morgan," the foreman himself put in, but there was bewilderment in his eyes. "The boss knows he can trust me. Always could and always will be able to, come hell or high water."

"I know that." Morgan smiled at Russell. "That's why I'm suggestin' for him to fire yuh—because he *can* trust yuh. Now, listen. If yuh was fired from the Bar B, Chuck, the first thing yuh would do would be join up with another outfit, isn't that right?"

"Shore," the young foreman nodded. "Why not?"

"All right then. A man might learn a plumb heap thataway! There's too many riders—and good ones, too—causing trouble around here for it to be jest sheepmen that's back of all that's goin' on."

"Yuh mean that them little cow spreads in the valley might be in on this business some way?" demanded Russell. "And if I was hangin' around out of a job I might learn somethin'?"

"Good chance of it." Morgan nodded. "Yuh was fired from the Bar B caused Brackton didn't trust yuh, and yuh're right sore about it. *Sabe?*"

"What you think, Boss?" Russell looked at the ranch owner.

Brackton was scratching his head thoughtfully. "Might be somethin' to Morgan's idea," he admitted. "But I ain't even pretendin' to fire yuh unless it's all right with you, Chuck."

"All right," said Chuck Russell. "We'll do it!" He grinned. "Yuh're firin' me come mornin', Boss."

"Better make it seem real by not tellin yore daughter and sister about it yet, Brackton," suggested Morgan. "Not that they would talk—but it jest might be stronger that way." He glanced at the foreman. "And Chuck, I shore wouldn't be wastin' no time gettin' a job somewheres, if I was you."

"Guess yuh're right," Russell said quietly. "But I shore hate the idea of Lucy and Miss Jenny not knowin'."

"All right, we'll do it," said Brackton. "Yore fired, Chuck." He grinned and shook his head ruefully. "But Lucy and Jenny'll shore raise hell!"

"Remember yuh got to convince 'em yuh mean it," said Morgan. "If yuh don't it ain't gonna work."

"All right." Brackton shivered. "It's cold out here. Let's get back to the house."

They found that it was not snowing so hard as they made their way back to the ranchhouse. There was a chance of the storm ceasing before many hours had passed.

The let-up was a relief to Morgan for to his experienced eyes it had looked as if a two- or three-day blizzard was in progress. That would have meant that he would be snowbound at the Bar B, and he did not like that idea. There was too much yet to be done if he hoped to clear up the trouble between the sheep owners and the cattlemen.

As he followed Brackton into the big living room Wayne Morgan saw that Lucy was no longer there. Evidently she had returned to her room. Miss Jenny was still waiting, though, sitting in her chair knitting. She had put more wood on the fire in the stove and it was burning brightly.

"Norton got away," Brackton said wearily, dropping into a chair. "Saddled a hoss and lit out into the storm."

"Glad he's gone!" snapped Miss Jenny. "I never liked that man anyway." But there was a thoughtful expression on the face of the keen-eyed woman. "Gage, I've been thinking. That man who came here tonight to warn you of the trap that had been set for the outfit at the river. The man dressed in black who calls himself the Masked Rider. Remember I told you about him?"

"What about him?" asked Brackton. "All I know about him is he shore saved all of us down at the river tonight."

"We need that man to help us, Gage," said Miss Jenny with positiveness. "If there was only some way that we could find him—tell him about all the trouble that has been happening around here."

"Heard of this hombre they call the Masked Rider myself," Morgan remarked quietly. "From what they say he don't have to be told much. He usually knows when folks are in trouble and does somethin' about it."

"Does he?" Miss Jenny's eyes were fixed intently on the strong face of the tall, dark-haired man. "I'm glad!"

Morgan's expression did not change, but he was startled. Did this woman suspect that he and the black-clad outlaw were one and the same man?

CHAPTER XV

Blue Hawk Makes Discoveries

EARLY morning found the sun shining brightly over miles and miles of country buried beneath a far-flung mantle of gleaming white. The drifts were high in the canyons and ravines of the Big Hills and in the gulches and dry-washes scattered throughout the huge valley.

With the coming of the sun it had grown warmer, though there was still a crispness in the air. The glare on the whiteness was blinding and it was wise to protect the eyes from it as much as possible.

Brackton had not gone through with his pretense of firing Chuck Russell up to the time that Morgan had left the Bar B. He did not doubt that they would carry out the plan, but had decided to put it off until later in the morning.

Most of the Bar B outfit had ridden out onto the range to check up on the stock, as soon as it was light, and to see if they could find any trace of the part of the herd that had disappeared from Shelter Canyon. They had also been ordered to keep on the lookout for Scott Norton, in case the former Bar B *segundo* might still be somewhere in the valley.

It was not more than an hour after he had left the ranch that Wayne Morgan swung out of the saddle outside of Carew's cabin back in the mountains. The gray-bearded trapper was still at the Bar B recovering from his wound, but he had been much stronger this morning when Morgan had seen him before leaving.

Blue Hawk appeared in the doorway of the cabin, a smile on his copper-hued face to greet the Masked Rider. He led the roan around the cabin and placed the horse in the leanto with his own pinto as the outlaw entered the little log house and warmed himself before the fire.

"Hoped you would get here soon, Senor," said the Yaqui as he stepped inside the cabin and closed the door. "Strange things happen, things Blue Hawk does not understand."

"Tell me about it, Hawk." Morgan seated himself on a rough bench beside the fire. "Sounds interestin'."

"Did not get a chance to tell all I learned across river yesterday," Blue Hawk said. "Found that old couple, Sam White and his wife, safe on their sheep ranch. No one had ordered them to leave again."

"Good!" Morgan smiled. "Was shore somethin' was wrong about them Government notices when I first heard their story. I was right. But go on, Hawk."

"Told you that I talked to Indian herders. They say sheepmen blame cattlemen for all the trouble."

"That's so," the outlaw agreed. "What with findin' Carew tied up at his cabin and learnin' about the trap for the cattlemen at the river yuh didn't have time to give me much details. Tell me all yuh learned, Hawk."

"Found that there were four sheep

ranches close to the river, more of them farther south," went on Blue Hawk. "Biggest one near river owned by John Murdock, one of the smaller ones by Sam White. Other sheepmen do as Murdock says."

"I was shore of that," said Morgan. "Go on."

Blue Hawk told his story swiftly but in full detail. He had learned to observe everything that went on about him and as usual he had missed little. Murdock, he said, dominated the other sheep owners and forced them to obey his orders even when they were reluctant. He kept a bunch of men around him who looked and acted far more like gunmen than shepherds. That these men were mounted on fast horses was an interesting detail that Blue Hawk had learned.

"YUH figger they might be the riders that killed off all of the sheepmen yesterday mornin'?" asked Morgan, as the Yaqui paused.

"Might be, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "But why should they do that? Sheepmen and riders both belong to same side. Why kill off their own men?"

"The cattlemen was blamed for it, wasn't they?" asked the outlaw.

"So Indians told me." Blue Hawk nodded. "It was this that made sheepmen willing to place dynamite on river last night to trap the cattlemen."

"Then that's it, Hawk!" Conviction was in Wayne Morgan's tone. "Murdock deliberately had those sheepmen take the flock across the river! He knew there'd be trouble when the cattlemen headed for the canyon with a herd and found fellers with a flock of sheep tryin' to beat 'em to it."

"You are right, Senor. Then when there was not big battle between cattlemen and herders the riders came and killed sheepmen as they headed flock back to river."

"Shore! Murdock is stirrin' up trouble plumb deliberate! Because he wants to drive both sheep and cattlemen away from this part of the country, if yuh ask me." The masquerading outlaw frowned. "Looks like that crooked sheriff was workin' with Murdock all right."

"Crooked sheriff?" Blue Hawk was puzzled.

Quickly Morgan told the Yaqui all that had happened the previous day. He related how the masked sheriff had tried to drygulch the four men when they had been in the canyon, how Sheriff Alton had been shot and killed—and of the letter from the Government.

"One of Brackton's men came back from Gunshot jest before I left the ranch this morning," Morgan informed as he finished his story. "Said that Alton's head deputy, Tom Wills, was actin' sheriff now. Wills is an honest man. He'll report to the Land Bureau about them fake Government notices. Reckon there won't be any more trouble for the ranchers about that, nor for the sheepmen neither. Trouble is it can't be proven that Murdock ever had that half of the letter. He wasn't there when I found it."

"Somebody is anxious to kill the ranchers, Brackton and Crane," said the Yaqui. "First sheriff tries to drygulch them, then man starts to shoot Brackton through window and sister saves him. You think man who was at window was Norton, Senor?"

"No, I'm shore it wasn't," the outlaw said flatly. "I saw hand of the feller who was holdin' the gun, and I've got an idea jest who it mighta been."

"Who, Senor?"

"Ain't sayin' jest yet, Hawk. Want to find out a few more things first." Wayne Morgan glanced about the cabin. "Good chance to look this place over now while Carew ain't here. Might be considerable help if we knew more about that hombre."

He rose from the bench and started wandering around the cabin, looking over Jim Carew's few possessions. Beneath the bunk he discovered a small wooden box thrust way back out of sight.

Drawing out the box Morgan exam-

ined its contents. There were a number of books, most of them classics, and something carefully wrapped in chamois. He unrolled this, revealing a handsome silver-mounted pistol. On the butt was engraved:

To J. A. Carew in appreciation of
loyal and faithful service,
Northern and Western Railroad.

"THAT'S it!" exclaimed Morgan. "Carew is an undercover man for the railroad himself! Thought he might be. Guess I better have me a little talk with him soon as I get a chance."

He rolled the gun in the chamois and placed it back in the box, then shoved the whole thing under the bunk.

"What do we do now, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Want yuh to head back across the river, Hawk," Morgan said, as he stamped out the fire in the open fireplace. "After what we've jest learned and what's already happened I figger there's gonna be plenty more trouble around here."

"Think Murdock will keep the sheepmen stirred up, Senor?" asked the Yaqui.

"Shore of it. I want yuh to find out what they're plannin' if yuh can. And another thing, see if Scott Norton joins up with Murdock's crowd."

"Have never seen Norton," said Blue Hawk. "What does he look like?"

Morgan described the wiry little man who had been the Bar B *segundo* in detail so that Blue Hawk would be sure to recognize him.

"He's been workin' for Murdock all the time, under cover," the outlaw said grimly. "But now I figger he'll come out in the open about it."

They left the cabin and got their horses out of the leanto. In a few moments they were riding away through the snow.

"While we're back here in the mountains we might scout around and see if we can find any trace of the rest of that Bar B herd," Morgan suggested as they rode.

They went on in silence, each busy with their own thoughts. There was no sound save the crunching of their horses' hoofs in the deep snow. Hat brims were pulled low over their eyes to shade them from the bright glare of the sun reflecting on mile after mile of shining white spread out all about them.

Towering cliff walls piled high with snow loomed above them as they rode farther back into the Big Hills. Drifts were continually falling from cliff and ledges in white waves, for the warmth of the sun had melted the snow enough to make it move easily.

For near an hour they rode, then abruptly discovered that their search had been productive.

"Look, Senor!" Blue Hawk pointed ahead as they rode into a canyon hidden far back in the mountains. "Dead cattle!"

Half buried in the snow were the carcasses of over a hundred longhorns, every one of them killed by bullets. With them were two dead men and horses.

"That's what become of the rest of the Bar B herd and the two waddies Brackton said was missin' from Shelter Canyon," observed the Masked Rider. "They were driven back here to make it look like they'd been rustled, and the two Bar B waddies were taken along and killed." The outlaw's blue eyes flashed. "Hawk, the men behind all of this deserve plenty of punishment!"

Again Morgan found bitter hatred in his heart for those who were behind this ruthless and unnecessary slaughter of sheep and cattle, to say nothing of the toll in human life.

They studied the place carefully, but there was nothing they could do here. Both of the waddies had been dead for quite some time. The Masked Rider and the Yaqui rode away.

AN hour later they separated, Blue Hawk heading for the river to

return to the sheep country and Wayne Morgan bound for the Bar B to tell Brackton what he had discovered far back in the mountains.

Ploughing through the snow, Morgan had reached the south side of the Big Hills when just as he rode through a ravine a rider loomed into view. As the horseman drew closer he recognized Gage Brackton and in a moment more he could see that the Bar B owner was in a highly excited and angry frame of mind.

"Yuh see her?" Brackton demanded as he halted his horse close to Morgan's roan. The angry scowl on the stocky rancher's face deepened.

"See who?" Morgan asked anxiously.

"My daughter Lucy!" snapped the Bar B owner. "Should a known that idea of yours about firin' Chuck was gonna play hell!"

"What happened?"

"I fired Russell like yuh said. He acted real hurt about it 'cause Lucy and Jenny was listenin'—and they shore said a plenty to me. He got his things and rode off. I rode out to Shelter Canyon with some of the men. When I got back I found out that Lucy had saddled her hoss and rode away. She left word with Jenny that if Chuck went she was goin' too. Said she'd search the valley till she found him."

"Chuck will bring her back to the ranch if she finds him," Morgan said confidently, but was not feeling much confidence himself. That sense of his that always warned him of something wrong was urgently pounding for attention.

"He can't, unless he gives the whole thing away," Brackton snapped. "You and yore bright ideas!"

"Yuh any idea which way she went?"

"Followed her hoss' tracks back here toward the hills," Brackton said. "Another rider joined up with her. Reckon it was Chuck, but they're still headin' back into the mountains. Can't understand why." He pointed to horse tracks in the snow off to the left. "They came this way."

"Reckon we better follow 'em," Morgan said promptly. The warning sense was working overtime now, but he kept his perturbation from the ranch owner as instantly he whirled his mount.

"When I catch that gal of mine I'll shore give her a piece of my mind!" Brackton muttered.

With what speed they could, they followed the trail of the two horses that was clearly visible in the snow. Though he was anxious about Lucy, Wayne Morgan told Brackton about the dead cattle he had discovered far back in the canyon. The owner of the Bar B cursed as he heard the news, and his angry scowl boded no good for the killers, if they could be caught.

Towering cliffs loomed high above the two horsemen as they entered a canyon. From high on the mountain top came a rumbling noise as the loose snow moved.

"There they are!" shouted Brackton as he spied two riders ahead of them. "That's Lucy's little sorrel mare. I'd know that hoss anywhere!"

"But that's not Russell with her!" snapped Morgan.

His hand streaked for the gun on his right hip as they drew closer. The man ahead turned in the saddle to look back at them.

"It's Scott Norton!" Morgan shouted. "He's got the girl!"

NORTON fired the instant he got a good look at the two men behind him. Brackton cursed, snatching out his own gun, as a bullet just missed his head. Morgan's gun roared, but the moment he had fired Norton had swung his horse around so that the girl and her mount were between him and the two other men.

Morgan did not dare fire again. Too much danger of hitting Lucy. His lips tightened in an angry line at the realization that his first bullet had gone wild.

So tense was the dramatic scene,

that at first the participants in it heeded nothing else. Then came the sudden knowledge that from the mountain side the roaring was increasing.

Morgan glanced up, then uttered an alarmed shout.

"Avalanche!" he yelled. "Comin' down fast! We're right under it!"

Brackton shot one swift glance upward. Morgan was right! The snow sliding down the mountain was growing in volume as it descended. It was now one huge white mass.

"Head back the way we come!" shouted Brackton. "More chance of shelter there."

Ahead, Norton and Lucy Brackton were swiftly disappearing in the distance. Morgan wheeled his mount, forcing the roan into a gallop as he followed Brackton.

With a roar the avalanche slid down the side of the mountain, carrying trees and brush with it. The two riders had just reached safety when ton after ton of snow piled down into the canyon on the spot where just moments ago they and their horses had stood.

By only a matter of seconds Brackton and Morgan had escaped being buried alive beneath snow that would have piled high over their heads. For snow now filled the gulch to a height of nearly forty feet.

"That was shore close!" Brackton said hoarsely. "Thank Gawd it didn't get Lucy!"

Morgan was staring morosely at the high-piled snow. No chance for them to get through the canyon now. And somewhere beyond the huge pile of white was the desperate killer who had been the *segundo* of the Bar B and a slender brown-haired girl who was at his mercy.

"The avalanche didn't get Miss Lucy," Morgan said grimly. "But she's in a plumb plenty of danger as long as she is with Norton!"

He wheeled his horse.

"Come on, Brackton, we got to circle! We gotta find 'em!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Hideout

QUITE naturally, it took time for Morgan and Brackton to circle around the canyon, heading northeast in the direction that Norton and Lucy had gone. After searching for an hour their worry grew. They had been unable to find a single trace of the *segundo* and Lucy Brackton.

"Looks bad!" Brackton said tightly, and cursed. "If that sidewinder harms my gal I'll tear him to pieces."

Morgan said nothing. He wanted to assure the owner of the Bar B that his daughter was safe but he could not. Too well he knew that Scott Norton was a dangerous and a desperate man. The little *segundo* would delight in revenging himself against the man who had discovered him to be a traitor. It even was highly possible that Norton would delight in torturing Brackton's daughter. No telling just what the man might do.

Both men were grimly silent then, their tired eyes searching the white expanse that told them nothing. It was just as they reached a pass in the mountains that a band of horsemen loomed into view.

"Breeze Crane and some of his waddies!" Brackton cried, brightening. "We'll get 'em to help us look for Norton and Lucy."

The owner of Circle C rode closer and halted. Behind him his men reined their horses.

"Don't think much of the company yuh keep, Gage," Breeze Crane snapped, as he glared at Morgan. "Reckon yuh know that hombre downed one of my men last night."

"Heard about it, Breeze," Brackton said, but he was not interested. "There ain't no time to bother about that now. Scott Norton has kidnaped my daughter!"

"What?" Surprise swept over

Crane's handsome face. "Why should Norton do that? He's one of yore men."

"He was," said Brackton, a bitter note in his voice. "Found out that he had been workin' for Murdock and the sheepmen undercover. Got so yuh don't know who to trust any more."

"Norton workin' with Murdock!" Crane exclaimed. "It don't seem possible." He turned to his men with a sharp command. "You boys get ridin'! Cover all of the valley if yuh have to, but keep goin' until yuh find Norton and Lucy Brackton! Ride, all of yuh!"

Ten salty-looking Circle C waddies wheeled their mounts. Snow crunched beneath the feet of their horses as they separated and rode off in different directions.

"Thanks, Breeze," Brackton muttered gratefully. "Havin' yore men searchin' for Lucy is shore a help."

"All the same I'm wonderin' jest why yuh're trustin' this man Morgan so much," Crane said, a tone of doubt in his voice. Again his glance at the masquerading outlaw was a glare. He studied Morgan thoughtfully, rubbing his chin with his scarred right hand. "One of my men, Tom Shad, tells me this jasper acted mighty suspicious-like at the line camp shack last night when he killed Bill Thorton. I'm thinkin' he might be a spy for the sheepmen!"

"Shad's a liar!" Morgan said, softly and firmly. "Both him and Norton said they suspected me of bein' an undercover man for the N. and W. last night. Whatever they meant by that—why the N. and W. should have an undercover man here for anyhow."

"That doesn't make sense!" snarled Crane. "Why should those two jaspers be worryin' about a railroad man?"

"Do yuh know," Morgan said slowly, his hands close to the butts of his guns, "that's somethin' that's been interestin' me a heap!"

CRANE frowned and lapsed into silence.

"I pass," said Brackton. "All this is gettin' too deep for me! Don't even know what you two are talkin' about."

"No point in stayin' here arguin' about it," said Breeze Crane. "We better get lookin' for Lucy and Norton."

"Seein' as Crane here ain't overfond of my company," Wayne Morgan drawled, "mebbe it would be better if I did my lookin' by my lonesome."

He wheeled his roan and rode away, not heeding Brackton's protest, nor Crane's mocking laugh that followed him.

With Brackton he had circled around so that he was not far from the cave where he and Blue Hawk had left their other horses. He headed for this, Midnight would move faster. Riding the black stallion he would have much more chance of catching the *segundo* and Lucy Brackton if he should sight them.

A glance back showed him that Brackton and Crane were just disappearing around a snow-covered bluff. Morgan frowned as he rode on. He wondered just how much Crane might say to poison Gage Brackton's mind against the wandering waddy who was taking a hand in their affairs.

"Crane shore don't like me none," Morgan mused wryly. "And seein' as I had to down his man Thorton I reckon I ain't blamin' him much. He's got a right to be suspicious of strangers. Reckon I would be, too, if I was in his place."

When finally he reached the entrance to the cave it was to find that the opening was hidden by huge snow-covered boulders that were scattered about in front of it. There was less chance now than ever of its being discovered, unless whoever looked for it knew the cave was there.

"If I had kidnaped a gal like Norton did," muttered Morgan, "I shore wouldn't stay out in the open long. Too much chance of bein' seen in the daylight. Yes, sir, I'd hit for cover."

The keen blue eyes narrowed as the import of his own words struck him.

Scott Norton must be familiar with every section of the Big Hills Valley, must know every nook and cranny. No doubt he had explored all of it whenever the men of the Bar B outfit had been searching for strays at whatever season.

"There's a plumb good chance of his knowin' about this cave," Morgan considered, as he rode the roan into the cavern's dark mouth. "But if he's headed for it, he's shore takin' a long time to get here. He had plenty of headstart, what with the way that avalanche slowed Brackton and me up and made us circle around." He frowned in the darkness. "Mebbe he aims to double back and come here later."

That thought spurred him to action. Hastily he switched saddle and bridle from the roan to Midnight, then as rapidly donned the black costume of the Masked Rider.

As he adjusted the black mask across the upper part of his face beneath the shadowing wide brim of the sombrero, the faint light that came in through the cave entrance revealed a startling change in his appearance. Beneath the mask, his firm jaw was of rocklike hardness. His lips had set in a straight line. No longer was this the strong, friendly face of Wayne Morgan. Once more Wayne Morgan had disappeared; the Masked Rider stood in his boots.

THE Masked Rider drew the roan and Blue Hawk's gray horse far back in the cave where they were hidden in the darkness. If Scott Norton did bring the girl to the cave there was little chance of his discovering the two horses unless they made some sound, or he explored the place thoroughly.

Midnight stood ready, impatient to go. But the Robin Hood outlaw decided to take a look around outside the cave on foot before he rode out of the place mounted on the black stallion. No telling who might have strayed this far. And while he felt that the men of the Bar B outfit would consider him a friend since with guns blazing he had come to their aid, at the river the previous night, he had not forgotten the drygulchers and other riders with whom he had battled.

Moving cautiously out between the boulders, he quickly ducked out of sight behind one of the big rocks. He had heard the swish and crunch of horses traveling through the snow. Riders were approaching and whether friend or foe he could not guess.

He made no attempt to draw his guns as yet. Time enough for that when he learned the identity of the oncoming riders. The melting snow on the top of the boulder trickled down on his sombrero and the shoulders of the black cloak as he peered around the edge of the rock.

The Masked Rider's heart leaped as he recognized the two riders. The bright sunlight gleamed down on the tall, slender girl on the little sorrel mare. There was an expression of fright on Lucy Brackton's lovely young face, and her chin was buried deep in the collar of the short, warm coat she wore over her riding togs.

She shivered as the little wiry man who rode beside her said something to her in a gruff tone. Scott Norton laughed, and the sound had as much humor in it as the growl of a wolf.

In the Masked Rider's eyes was a glint of steel as he watched. With deliberate slowness he drew off his gauntlets and thrust them into his belt. The butts of his heavy guns were icy to the touch of his bare hands as his fingers closed about them.

The horses of Norton and the girl were so close now that the black-clad man could hear the creaking of their saddle leather and the clinking of a bit chain. He shook himself and the snow cascaded from the brim of his hat and from his shoulders. It was soft beneath his feet as he stepped out from behind the boulder with his guns in his hands.

To Scott Norton the black-clad figure was a horrible apparition that had

suddenly materialized. The *segundo* had believed that now that he had forced the girl back here to this hidden spot amid the vastness of the towering peaks of the mountains he had reached a haven of safety. Now he knew he was wrong.

Norton sensed the implacable menace of the tall masked man who confronted him. Sunlight gleamed on the long blue barrels of the Colts in the Masked Rider's hands. To the *segundo* the muzzles of those guns seemed to raise like the heads of twin cobras about to strike.

The girl's mare edged away from Norton's mount as though the little sorrel horse sensed she was far too close to death. Lucy Brackton's eyes were wide as she gazed at the black-clad man.

"Reach sky, hombre!"

THE Masked Rider's voice was as cold as the little gust of wind that ruffled the drifts about them. The guns in his hands, firm and steady, were pointed at the *segundo*—one at his head; the other at his heart.

Hastily Norton's arms shot up, stretching out to their full length, as though trying to carry out the order literally and clutch the blue high over his head. The gun in his holster seemed a thousand miles away.

"You're the Masked Rider," Lucy said slowly. "Dad told us about you helping our outfit at the river last night." Relief replaced the terror in her face. "Then you must be a friend!"

"That's right," said the black-clad man. "Yore friend, but not Norton's!"

"I wasn't jest exactly kidnapin' the gal!" Norton chattered, words rushing out of his mouth like water flowing through a broken dam. "Jest run across her out on the range and brought her along for protection like —that was all. Didn't mean her no harm—not a bit! Jest kinda thought I would be safer if I had her with me—"

"Get off yore hoss!"

The flat deadly tone of the Masked Rider shut off the flow of words.

For one breath only Norton hesitated, then lowered his arms and swung out of the saddle. It was his chance and he took it. As he dropped on the far side of his horse he snatched out his gun. But as he fired there was an answering roar from the weapons of the black-clad man.

The *segundo* pitched forward to sprawl motionless in the deep snow. A bullet had caught him in the forehead. His own slug had just missed the Masked Rider's left cheek as it sped by.

Lucy Brackton cried out sharply, shuddering as she sat on her horse, watching.

"Sorry, Miss." The Masked Rider thrust his guns into the holsters. "Didn't think he would make such a fool play. Was aimin' to tie him up and take him in a prisoner."

"I—I understand," Lucy choked, as the black-clad man drew closer. "It was the only way—" Her eyes closed as if to shut out the awful sight, and though she swayed a little, she quickly got a grip on herself. Lucy Brackton was not a girl of the West, the daughter of her father, for nothing.

From the lips of the outlaw issued a shrill whistle and in a moment Midnight came galloping out from behind the boulders. The Masked Rider swung into the saddle on the black stallion.

"Reckon I better be gettin' yuh home, Miss Brackton," he said as he halted his horse beside the girl.

"Yes, please do!" begged Lucy.

They rode away in silence. As they rounded a bend in the snow-covered trail the Masked Rider glanced back.

Scott Norton's horse stood not far from the still form of the man who would never again betray his outfit. Both the horse and the body would eventually be found by the men who were searching the valley for the girl. Getting Lucy Brackton safely back home was the important thing for the Masked Rider to accomplish now. No

one need worry about Norton any longer.

CHAPTER XVII

The Wounded Gunman

PLODDING on through the snow-shrouded vastness of the mountains, rode the tall, black-clad man on the big stallion and the slender girl on the sorrel mare.

"I've heard people talk of the Masked Rider," Lucy said finally, when the silence grew a little oppressive. "But until now you never seemed real. The stories they've told made you part of a strange legend of the West." She laughed softly. "Like one of the heroes in the fairy stories that I used to read when I was a little girl."

"And now I reckon yuh're right disappointed," said the Masked Rider, with a light laugh.

His voice and his laugh of course were so different from Wayne Morgan's drawl and his dry chuckle that the girl who rode beside him could have no faintest idea that she knew the face that was hidden behind the mask.

"If so," he went on, "I can't blame yuh none. Folks talk of me like I was a kind of avengin' ghost. But I'm jest a kinda Western Robin Hood mebbe, an outlaw who happens to be middlin' fast with his guns."

"I know," said Lucy Brackton. "And an outlaw who is human enough and kind enough to devote his life to helping those who need his aid!"

The Masked Rider gave her a grateful glance through the eye-holes of his mask, and they rode on out of the mountains, talking casually as their horses made their way through the snow. It was past noon, but the sun was still bright and the white drifts were melting.

They had almost reached the Bar B ranch before Lucy quite realized that she knew no more about this masked man than she had when he had first stepped into view from behind the big boulder to confront Norton. And instinctively she knew she would never know much more about him.

"Listen!" the Masked Rider exclaimed sharply as they came within a quarter of a mile of the ranch. "There's trouble ahead!"

From the distance came the sound of gunfire. Both the outlaw and the girl grew tense as they heard it. That shooting was going on at the Bar B!

Without a word they urged their horses to a swifter pace, sending them plowing through the snow with flashing hoofs. They topped a rise and the buildings of the Bar B appeared.

The Masked Rider's face grew grim as he surveyed the scene in front of them. A band of mounted men and others on foot were circling around the ranchhouse on the knoll, firing at the windows as they went. Ten horsemen, attacking the place in the fashion of the Apaches who had staged their raids on covered wagon trains but a few years previous.

Cannily they were taking advantage of the fact that men on swift moving horses did not present easy targets, and by circling around they were able to fire at all four sides of the big ranchhouse, with a minimum of danger to themselves.

From one of the windows on the left side of the house came the flash of a gun. Someone was defending the ranch. Who? He was galloping swiftly closer, with Lucy far behind him, for Midnight quickly outdistanced the girl's mare.

From a window in the front of the house he saw another gun flash. One of the circling riders dropped out of the saddle into the snow. He could not see the back of the house, but hoped someone was at a window there also, as well as on the right side of the place.

HIS guns were in his hands as he galloped on. The raiders were

strung out in single file as they circled. The man on the end of the line was just galloping around the left side of the building as the rider in the lead loomed into view at the right of the building.

The gun in the Masked Rider's right hand roared. The man who had just appeared reeled back in the saddle with a bullet in his brain. The man behind him died as the outlaw's second gun boomed.

Swiftly he came on toward them as raider after raider came into view. Now they were firing at him, sending their bullets dangerously close. But the very unexpectedness of his attack had startled them, confused them, and they were firing wildly.

Not only that but the people in the house had been quick to see what was occurring and were concentrating their fire on the riders who were now bunched in the back and at the right side of the building.

A withering blast of lead swept through the ranks of the mounted men, and with it—death!

"They've got us!" shouted a terrified raider. "Get—"

A bullet from the ranchhouse caught his horse. It fell, burying him in the snow beneath it as he tried to leap out of the saddle.

Another man died with a shouted curse cut off abruptly. One of the men who had been wounded in the leg and in the chest slid out of the kak, ran a few steps, then sat down in the snow with a surprised expression on his hard face as his leg refused any longer to hold him up.

The Masked Rider had been firing steadily, making every one of his bullets count. Six men had died from those blazing guns—and the defenders in the house had brought down the other four raiders.

Riderless horses bucked and squealed. Some just wandered around aimlessly. There was blood on the snow close to the figures of the sprawled dead men. The smell of gunsmoke was heavy in the cold air, but the battle was over. The Bar B, aided by the Masked Rider, had won.

Lucy had wisely halted her horse just beyond the outer edge of the fight. She wore no gun and there had been nothing that she could do to aid in the defense of the ranch.

The Masked Rider reloaded his gun, then rode around to the front of the house. Jenny Brackton appeared in the doorway, a rifle in her hand, as Lucy swung out of the saddle and rushed up the steps onto the porch.

"Lucy, honey!" Miss Jenny took the girl in her arms. "Thank God you are safe. We've been so worried about you!"

"I'm all right, Aunt Jenny," Lucy quickly assured. She glanced over her shoulder as the Masked Rider ground-hitched Midnight and came up on the porch. "Thanks to him."

"The Masked Rider," said Miss Jenny Brackton, gazing hard at the outlaw. "We are again in your debt—not only for bringing Lucy home safe, but for coming to our rescue just now against those raiders."

"Didn't look like there was many folks defendin' the place, ma'am," observed the Masked Rider.

"There wasn't," said Miss Jenny. "Only the two waddies that Gage left to guard the place, Jim Carew and myself."

"Four people fighting ten men," admiration sparkled in the masked man's eyes. "And doing a mighty good job of it!"

ONE of the waddies who had been inside the house appeared from around the side of the place where he had been examining the bodies of the raiders.

"Excuse me, Miss Jenny," he said. "But there's one of them hombres that ain't dead. Wounded right bad, but he's still livin'. What had we better do with him?"

"Bring him into the house, of course," ordered Miss Jenny. "Even if he is an enemy we can't leave him lying out here in the snow."

The Bar B man went back to repeat the order to his companion. The two cowboys carried the wounded man into the house and placed him on a couch in the big living room.

The Masked Rider had followed Miss Jenny and Lucy into the house. The gray-bearded trapper was in the living room, but Carew merely nodded in greeting as he saw the black-clad man, and said nothing.

Both he and the Masked Rider listened as Lucy told Miss Jenny her story. The girl swiftly related how she had been kidnaped by Norton and rescued by the Masked Rider, and how the *segundo* had been killed in a gun battle.

While they talked the two women were busy dressing the wounds of the raider who had been shot in the chest and in the leg. He was a hard-faced gunman, and there was a puzzled expression in his eyes as he watched Miss Jenny and Lucy Brackton bandaging his wounds.

They had quickly discovered that the bullet in his chest had entered close to his heart. There was little chance the man could live for any length of time.

"Don't understand," he muttered. "We was tryin'—kill yuh all off—yet yuh're helpin' me. Plumb funny—" His muttered words trailed off. It was too difficult to talk.

It was not more than fifteen minutes later that six weary riders rode up to the ranchhouse. Gage Brackton and five of his men. They had been searching for Lucy, and the ranch owner had finally decided to return to the Bar B to see if there had been any word of the girl.

The stocky rancher swung out of the saddle and came dejectedly up on the porch. Then his expression changed, the hopeless look gave way to one of delight as his daughter appeared at the door.

"Lucy!" he choked, as she rushed out and threw her arms about him. "Lucy, child—yuh're safe!"

There was a babble of voices, excited explanations, as Lucy and Brackton entered the big living room. Finally the owner of the Bar B gained a clear idea of what had happened.

"Owin' a lot to yuh," he said, turning to the black-clad outlaw and holding out his hand. "Reckon this raid on the spread is jest one more thing we can blame on the sheepmen."

"Ain't the sheepmen." With effort the wounded man on the couch raised his voice. All eyes turned to him. "There's a bunch of us—been hired to do—all the killin' around here. Never did like—drygulchin'—fightin' women—"

"Who hired yuh?" demanded the Masked Rider. Swiftly he moved to the side of the wounded man. "Tell us!"

"Can't do it." The man on the couch shook his head. His eyes closed as pain racked him. "But yuh been—good to me. Tell yuh my bunch—gonna raid sheep ranches — tonight. Kill off flocks—men—blame it on cattlemen—" His voice was steadily growing weaker but he was making a valiant effort to talk, to repay the kindness of which he had known so little.

"What?" exclaimed Brackton. "Yuh mean that, hombre?"

"Shore do." Painfully the wounded man opened his eyes. There was truth in them. "Raid tonight—blame Bar B—Circle C—" He shuddered and his eyes grew glassy. "Somebody —please take off my boots."

IT was the Masked Rider who swiftly pulled off the wet and muddied boots.

"Thanks," he murmured. "Never figgered on comin' to end of trail—this way — remember — sheepmen — raid tonight—"

Again he shuddered and grew so still he would never move again.

"Yuh heard him, Brackton." The Masked Rider spun around to the Bar B. "And I'm askin' you and yore outfit to help protect them sheepmen from attack tonight!"

"Protect the sheepmen!" Brackton glared at him. "You crazy, man? Go to their aid after what they done to us at the river last night?"

"After hearin' what this man jest said how can yuh be shore it *was* the sheepmen we were fighting?" demanded the Masked Rider.

"That's true, Gage," Miss Jenny put in hastily. "He is right! If you lead our men in defense of the sheep ranchers it might mean that it would bring peace to the valley. You must at least consider it, Gage, for all our sakes."

For a moment Gage Brackton hesitated, a frown on his face, and then finally he nodded. It never took the quick-thinking rancher long to make up his mind.

"All right," he said slowly. "I'll do it—take a bunch of the men and head over into the sheep country as soon as it grows dark." He shook his head. "Don't like the idea much, though. Got a feelin' we might be headin' into some sort of a trap!"

"I'll join you and yore men at the north bank of the river come dark," was the Masked Rider's last word as he turned toward the door. "Got to be ridin' now."

Before they could question him he had stepped outside, closing the front door of the ranchhouse behind him. In a moment he was in the saddle of the black stallion and galloping swiftly away.

"I hoped that we might have that man's aid," said Miss Jenny. "And I got my wish. I shall always be glad of that!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Guns on the Ice

ZIPPILY clear and cold was the night, a new moon was shining in the deep blue sky as twenty men from the Bar B rode toward the river with Gage Brackton in the lead of his waddies.

All were heavily armed and they rode silently through the snow. There were few among them that liked the idea of this mission on which they were riding. They hated sheepmen and blamed Murdock and the rest of the men across the river for all of the trouble in the valley.

It had taken a good bit of persuasion upon the part of Gage Brackton before the members of his outfit had agreed to come with him. He could have made it a direct order, but he had been reluctant to do that. He wanted the men to decide for themselves.

Though Brackton did not realize it, all of them had come, not from any change of heart that made them anxious to aid the sheepmen but merely to protect their boss. They would fight for their foes if need be, but their hearts would not be in it.

When he reached the north bank of the river a black-clad rider appeared from the shadow of some trees. He joined Brackton in the lead of the men.

"Got an idea that them raiders who are gonna make the attack will come across from this side of the river," the Masked Rider informed as they rode up stream to where the ice in the river was still solid. "That way it'll look like they come from yore spread and Crane's."

"There's somethin' to that," agreed Brackton. "Then mebbe the best thing for us to do is to spread out along the south bank when we get across."

"Good idea," said the outlaw.

"Sent word to Crane by one of my men that Lucy had been found," Brackton observed. "Also tellin' about what was goin' to happen tonight."

"Yuh hear anything further from him?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Yes, my rider brought back a note from Crane. Said in it that he thought I was crazy to go tryin' to help the sheepmen. Said he wouldn't have no part of it."

"Sounds like Circle C shore hates the sheepmen," was the black-clad man's comment.

"Can't blame 'em for that!" snapped Brackton. "So do I!"

They rode warily across the ice, for no one could know just what they might find hidden in the shadows of the opposite bank of the river. But they reached the south side of the stream without encountering anyone. At an order from Brackton the twenty men with him spread out along the bank. They dismounted and hid in the shadows.

Then began what seemed an interminable wait for the members of the Bar B outfit and the Masked Rider. In spite of the clear sky it was bitterly cold and discomfort grew as the waiting was prolonged.

"Don't think much of this," a disgruntled waddy muttered disgustedly. "Keep us out here freezin', and I'll bet nothin' ain't gonna happen. The old man is shore crazy."

"Mebbe," agreed another Bar B man. "But I ain't gonna argue with him about it." Then suddenly his tone changed. "Look!" he whispered tensely.

FROM the opposite side of the river a group of horsemen had started across the ice. There were twenty or thirty of them and their hats shaded their faces so that it was impossible to recognize them. But there certainly was something furtive in the way they came across the river.

"Here they come!" the Masked Rider said sibilantly to Brackton. "Pass the word to the men to let 'em get close, then drive 'em back with a blast of lead!"

"All right." The owner of the Bar B raised his voice enough for the man on his left to hear him. "When they get close, fire! Pass the word along."

The waddy repeated the order, and it went on down the line from man to man.

The mysterious riders were drawing closer, their horses' hoofs clattering on the thick ice. The Bar B men could see that they were heavily armed, some of them carrying rifles.

"Now!" shouted Brackton.

Guns roared and flamed along the bank as the Bar B men went into the action. Their first volley was fired over the heads of the riders on the ice, for Brackton's waddies were not dry-gulchers who would shoot down any enemy without giving a chance for life.

But instantly the weapons in the hands of the horsemen started barking and booming as they realized that they had run into an unexpected reception. One horsemen slid out of the saddle as a bullet from a Bar B man got him. His horse whirled and scampered back toward the opposite shore.

Then from the north bank of the river appeared a rider on a big bay horse. He galloped across the ice—and a sudden gust of wind tore his hat from his head. Clearly revealed in the moonlight was a dark, handsome face that there was no mistaking.

"What the hell!" yelled Brackton. "That's Breeze Crane!"

And then as he saw one of the horsemen on the ice glance over his shoulder at Crane, and then turn back toward the bank with no hostile move toward the Circle C owner, Brackton raised his voice in a louder shout.

"Stop firing!" he yelled. "Them jaspers on the ice are Crane's men!"

The Bar B waddies ceased firing as the word was passed down the line.

"Brackton?" Crane shouted, as he swung his horse in front of his men.

"Yes, here!" Brackton called from the river bank.

The owner of the Circle C rode his horse up the snow-covered bank where Brackton stood beside the Masked Rider.

"What the devil's the idea, Gage?" snarled Crane. "Yuh want to kill off all of my men, or somethin'?"

"Sorry, Breeze," said Brackton. "Thought yore men was the raiders headin' across the river to start trouble for the sheepmen."

"Told yuh that yuh was a fool to bother about them sheepmen," Crane snapped angrily. "Then I got to

thinkin' if yuh was crazy enough to try it mebbe I better bring some of my outfit along to help yuh. And what happens! Yore bunch starts killin' us off before we can even say who we are."

"The Masked Rider said for us to fire soon as them riders got close," Brackton protested weakly.

"OH, he did, huh?" Crane peered at the black-clad man. "Seems kinda strange that he was so anxious to get your outfit and mine fightin' before they knowed what's what. Yes, sir, mighty strange!"

"Yuh think I was tryin' to start trouble?" demanded the Masked Rider. His eyes were twin fires, glaring through the holes in his mask at the big man on the bay horse. "It wasn't me that told Brackton the sheepmen were gonna be raided tonight."

"That's so," said Brackton a little reluctantly. "But it was you that asked me and my men to help protect 'em." A new thought struck him. "You knew about the raid bein' planned before dark. Noticed yuh rode away from my spread in a hurry. Did yuh tell Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen they was gonna be raided tonight?"

"No, I didn't." The Masked Rider snapped his denial, but he made no explanation of where he had been or what he had done since leaving the Bar B spread.

He had spent the time in searching for the Yaqui, but he had been unable to find Blue Hawk in the valley.

"Why didn't yuh?" asked the owner of the Bar B.

"Because he knew it wasn't goin' to happen," Breeze Crane accused. "Mebbe this Masked Rider is the hombre who is back of all the trouble around here!"

"No!" snapped Brackton. "Yuh can't make me believe that—not after he's fought for my outfit twice, and the way he brought Lucy home safe to me. Reckon he kinda jest made a mistake." The stocky rancher gave a snort of disgust. "Hell with it! I'm not keepin' my men waitin' around here any longer for a raid that ain't likely to happen. Never did think much of them sheepmen anyway."

"Yuh're right, Gage," said Crane. "Too cold to be hangin' around outside much tonight. I'm headin' back to the ranch."

He called an order to his men who had bunched their horses at the river bank. Then, with Crane in the lead, the Circle C outfit rode back across the ice.

"Get yore hosses, boys!" shouted Brackton. "We're headin' home!"

A faint cheer rose from the men as they heard the order. They were half frozen and quite willing to head for the bunkhouse.

The Masked Rider quietly went to the black stallion and swung into the saddle. He had no desire to argue with Gage Brackton. If the Bar B outfit and Crane's waddies did not want to aid the sheepmen that was their business.

The men of the two outfits firing at each other, and even killing one of the Circle C men seemed a stupid blunder, but it was one of those things that could not be helped. Morgan did not feel that he should be blamed.

He realized now that he had made a mistake in not warning the various owners of the sheep ranches of the planned attack. But for some reason he had felt that doing so might be dangerous for all concerned since John Murdock was apparently not to be trusted.

Without giving Brackton a chance to say anything further to him, the Masked Rider rode back into the shadows of a wooded tract as he headed into the sheep country.

Back on the bank Gage Brackton cursed softly as he discovered that the black-clad man was gone.

"LIT out like we kinda got him mad," the Bar B owner muttered to himself. "Mebbe I'm makin'

a mistake in takin' the boys home but all the same we're headin' back to the ranch!"

The Bar B men rode back across the river and disappeared along the opposite bank. The Masked Rider sighed a little as he watched them go. He had halted his horse in the woods where he could see Brackton's outfit without being seen.

"Trouble, Senor?"

As silently as a ghost the Yaqui had appeared beside the big stallion.

"Hawk!" came the Masked Rider's low, surprised whisper. "Been lookin' for yuh all over. Where were yuh?"

"Been here in the sheep country all of the time," Blue Hawk answered laconically. "Learn many things. First that other three sheep ranch owners are tired of taking orders from John Murdock. He told them to send their herders to town tonight—said there was going to be big dance there and plenty of free food and liquor."

"He did, eh?" said the Masked Rider. "Did the herders go?"

"All but one or two of them at each of four ranches," answered the Yaqui. "Tonight good time for ranches to have trouble."

"Yuh're right, Hawk!" The Masked Rider's jaw hardened. "Listen!"

Hurriedly he told Blue Hawk what had happened during the last few hours both at the Bar B and on the river.

"I'm certain that dyin' gunnie told the truth," the outlaw said tightly. "Those raiders *are* gonna attack the sheep ranches tonight! Still figger they'll come across the river to do it, too, so's to look like cattlemen. Yuh got yore rifle with yuh, Hawk?"

"*Si,* Senor!"

"Good! I want yuh to stay here by the river on guard. If yuh see a bunch of riders comin' across the ice, fire three shots from yore rifle. Then I'll know the raiders are comin'!" He prodded Midnight into motion with his heels. "Now I'm goin' to warn the sheepmen that trouble's comin'!"

The words seemed to float back as the Masked Rider galloped away.

CHAPTER XIX

Rout of the Raiders

DEEP as it was, the snow on this side of the river was not as deep as it had been in the valley. Since the Masked Rider had crossed, Midnight was able to make better time than he had in racing through the Big Hills.

Beyond the stretch of wood was a road. The Masked Rider swung the black stallion onto this, sure that it led to the sheep ranches since it ran parallel to the river.

The moon gleamed down on the tall rider in the fluttering black cloak as he galloped his horse through the night. He had not gone more than a mile when he saw a light ahead and knew at once that it came from one of the sheep ranches off at the side of the road.

"I shore made a mistake in not findin' out from Blue Hawk jest which was Murdock's place," the masked man told himself. "Ain't so anxious about warnin' him about the raiders. Figger he already knows too much about it all."

Reaching the first ranch along his road, he rode up to the gate. By the moonlight he could easily make out the buildings and the sheep-pens.

"Hello, the house!" he shouted.

A door was thrust open and a man stood revealed in the light.

"What yuh want?" he demanded.

"Warn yuh that there's raiders comin' 'fore mornin'!" called the Masked Rider. "Be ready to guard yore flocks."

"Thanks!" The man slammed the door closed as the outlaw wheeled the stallion and rode back out onto the road.

Midnight's hoofs flashed as they galloped on along the snow-covered

road. But the Masked Rider had not gone more than a quarter of a mile when a glance back over his shoulder showed him that six riders were following him. They were lashing their mounts to top speed.

The outlaw laughed. "Not much chance of them hombres catchin' us, Midnight! Looks like I shore put my foot into it, though. That ranch musta been Murdock's place. Hit it the first thing! Guess he sent them jaspers after me."

Ahead loomed another of the sheep ranches. He managed to reach it ahead of his pursuers and shouted a warning to the two surprised men who appeared. "Where's the next spread?" he yelled at them.

They waved toward the south and he galloped off in that direction. Again he glanced back—and cursed. The six pursuing men were not far behind him now! His brief halt to warn the sheep ranchers had given them a chance to catch up.

"Ridin' faster hosses than I thought," the Masked Rider muttered. "We've got to keep movin', Midnight!"

Behind him a gun roared as one of the six men fired. But the bullet sped on by the masked man. Lightninglike one of his heavy Colts was out and his body swung half around in the saddle as he triggered his gun. And he did not miss. The leader of the six riders pitched out of the saddle as the bullet caught him.

"Lucky shot, Midnight," said Morgan.

He made no further attempt to fire at the men who galloped behind him, all his attention being given to reaching the next sheep ranch. He did reach it, though, still ahead of his pursuers, shouting his warning of danger. And before they could even thank him or ask questions he had flashed on.

BUT a surprise awaited him this time as he again swung out onto the road. The five riders suddenly appeared ahead of him. They had traveled through a short cut that had brought them to the sheep ranch faster than if they come by the road.

Their guns were roaring in their hands as they spurred their horses toward him. Bullets fairly rained about him, and one caught the edge of his right arm, just searing the flesh.

Even as his antagonists' first bullet was winging its deadly way, his own Colts were in his hands, bucking and flaming. And each bullet seemed to have the name of one of these men marked on it. One after the other they met leaden death as those slugs crashed into their bodies. Through a red haze the Masked Rider abruptly found himself staring at five empty saddles.

The moon beamed softly down on the bodies sprawled in the snow as the outlaw rode on, swiftly reloading his guns. The roaring of the Colts still echoed in his ears, and the flesh wound in his arm ached, but now was no time to stop. He urged the black stallion to greater speed.

He found that the fourth of the sheep ranches was closer to the river than had been the other three, for the road had swung back northward. Again the Masked Rider shouted as he rode near the ranchhouse.

A gaunt, elderly man appeared in a lighted doorway. The outlaw knew him at once. It was Sam White who stood there—and his wife was close behind the old sheepman.

"The Masked Rider!" White exclaimed. "It's him, Annie—the man that sent us back to our home! He was right, too! We ain't been bothered a mite by the Government." Then the old man's voice grew anxious. "Anything wrong?" he demanded.

"Trouble — came to warn yuh," panted the black-clad horseman. "Raiders comin' before mornin'! Try to fight them off till I round up the herders in town and bring 'em here!"

"We shore will!" Sam White announced grimly. "Hand me down my rifle, Annie."

From somewhere along the river came the sound of three shots.

"That's the signal!" cried the Masked Rider. "The raiders are on their way! Fight 'em off till I get back with the herders!"

He whirled his mount and galloped away like an ebony streak in the moonlight as Sam White slammed the door shut and barred it from the inside. . . .

Hell raged that night in the sheep country. From across the river came a large band of mounted men, bringing with them death and destruction as they galloped through the freezing cold.

All six of the sheep ranch owners had been warned and they barricaded themselves in their houses and battled valiantly, but they were outnumbered ten to one. There was little they could do but fight to the death.

Yet ever onward rode a horseman clad in black. He reached the sheep town to the southward and lifted his voice in a ringing shout.

"Sheepmen!" he thundered. "To your ranches! They're bein' raided!"

The reply to that tocsin call was instantaneous. From every building men dashed into the street, some swinging into their saddles, others piling into the wagons that had brought them into town to the dance.

Northward they galloped and rattled, hurrying through the snow, a grim crowd that gradually grew in ominous angry numbers as townsmen joined them. For this was sheep country and every man among them would fight for his own people.

ON through the moonlight they came with a black-clad rider streaking in the lead. Their guns were roaring even as they reached the first ranches, spreading out to others, hurling themselves into battle against the raiders who were viciously attacking those who were entrenched in the ranchhouses.

Withering blasts of lead drove back the sheepmen's foes, sent them spurring their mounts toward the ice-covered river. No longer were they brave and ruthless killers, for they had met their Waterloo. Those sheepherders battled like madmen, shooting, tearing men out of their saddles with their bare hands as they hurled themselves at the vicious killers.

And always the Masked Rider was in the thick of the fight, his heavy guns booming, his great black horse prancing, snorting as though the smell of gun powder in his nostrils had made of him a war horse indeed.

Battling every inch of the way, the raiders managed to reach the river, however, and started across the ice. Then from the opposite bank other riders loomed into view. Guns flamed in the hands of the new menace, driving the raiders back toward the sheepmen who lined the snow-covered south bank. The raiders were like rats caught in a trap! Over them spread a red haze of awful fear as shouts and screams for mercy rose heavenward.

"We ain't to blame for all this!" a hoarse voice boomed in terror. "Get Murdock! He hired us to make out we was sheepmen—to cause trouble! He—" A bullet cut short his plea.

And suddenly then there were no more raiders left, for their bodies were scattered about in the snow and on the ice. Riderless horses went dashing aimlessly through the night.

"Get Murdock!" screamed a maddened sheepman. "String him up!"

"Right!" shouted back the stocky man who had led the band of horsemen who had come from the other side of the river to battle the raiders. "Get Murdock!"

"Never did I think that I'd be echoin' that cry with you, Gage Brackton!" chattered old Sam White, his gray hair flying, the red light of battle still in his old eyes. "But you and yore outfit have come to the sheepmen's aid this night." His reedy old voice rose to a shriek. "Get John Murdock!"

But even as they yelled for vengeance, already through the night a black-clad horseman was galloping, heading for Murdock's ranch. Mur-

dock, of course, would try to get away once the leader of the sheepmen learned that the tide of battle had turned against him. Get him first—that was the answer.

But just as he reached the Murdock ranch the Masked Rider saw a horseman spurring rapidly away. In the moonlight it was not hard to recognize the big sheepman.

"Right curious about where that hombre is headin'," he thought quickly. "Reckon I'll try and follow him without bein' seen. Got a right good idea I know where he's goin', but I want to be shore."

Keenly the black-clad man watched and stalked Murdock as the big sheepman rode down onto the ice and across the river half a mile away from where the raiders had met defeat. Since he had a good idea of his destination the Masked Rider did not feel it was necessary to trail Murdock too closely. He didn't want to risk being seen.

So he waited until Murdock had disappeared on the north bank before he rode across the river. Behind him he heard shouts and knew that Brackton's outfit and the sheepmen were seeking John Murdock.

CHAPTER XX

Greed and Avarice

JOHN MURDOCK rode beneath the spell of an all engulfing fear. The snow-covered country bathed in the silvery light of the moon had become filled with stark menace. He seemed to see men waiting for him in the shadows with guns drawn. He was sure he was being followed as his horse headed onward. Every rustling of the shifting snow brought greater fear to the big man's heart.

He rode with his right hand on the butt of his gun until his gloved fingers became cramped and cold.

"Wasn't worth it," he muttered over and over. "Not for ten thousand dollars, to say nothin' of five. 'Sides I had to hire the men. It wasn't worth it!"

He grew tense as his horse rounded a bend in the vague trail he was following. A shadow had moved ahead of him in the moonlight. Murdock laughed mirthlessly as he saw that it was the shadow of a tree.

"Shore am gettin' jumpy," he thought.

Shortly buildings loomed before him, to become huge black blotches as the moon was hidden by a cloud. John Murdock rode up to a ranchhouse and tied the reins of his mount to a post half buried in the snow.

Lights gleamed through the windows of the ranchhouse as he went up the steps of the porch toward the front door. One hand went to the door, and his gun was in his other hand as he flung it open.

A man who had been standing gazing into the crackling flames in a big open fireplace turned slowly. He smiled as he saw the gun in the big sheepman's hand. "Yuh don't need that here, Murdock," he said.

"That's what you think!" Murdock's tone was flat and deadly. "But I figger different! Damn yuh, Crane, we've reached the end of the trail!"

The flickering flames cast a red glow on Breeze Crane's face as he stood there gazing at the sheepman, and in the weird light the countenance of the owner of the Circle C became satanic. With his dark hair, his small black mustache he was suddenly the devil come to life.

"What happened?" His voice was low, his attitude calm and detached, but John Murdock watched him as if he were on guard against a black leopard that might spring at any moment. "Yuh're scared, man. The raid musta failed!"

"It shore did," Murdock said raspily. "Every man dead—killed by Brackton and his outfit and the sheepmen led by the Masked Rider!"

"Brackton's outfit?" A look of surprise swept over Crane's dark face. "I thought I had convinced them that

aidin' the sheepmen was a mistake. Sent a bunch of my regular riders down to the river, and the Bar B outfit started to fight 'em, jest as I aimed for 'em to do."

"Yore regular waddies that work this spread, yuh mean?" asked Murdock. "Not them raiders that yuh had me hire to do all the dirty work?

"My regular waddies, of course," Crane said impatiently. "They didn't know nothin' about what's been goin' on." He smiled. "I was so shore of that little detail that I even hired Chuck Russell when he was fired from the Bar B this mornin'."

"YUH paid me five thousand to handle this mess for yuh, and give Sheriff Alton three thousand for his part of it," Murdock said ominously. "But after all that's happened I figger what I've done was worth a plumb heap more'n what I got."

"Meanin' jest what?"

"Meanin' I've got to clear out of this part of the country, pronto!" Murdock exploded. "And yuh're givin' me five thousand more!"

"Yuh're crazy!" snapped Crane. "Yuh already got all the money I'm gonna give yuh!"

"If folks was to find out jest who was back of all the trouble around here it shore would go hard with yuh," grimly intimated the former leader of the sheepmen.

"But they won't find out," said Crane.

"Then yuh're admittin' it?"

"To you, yes," Crane's voice was sinister, even though Murdock was still covering him with his gun. "But no one else will ever know about it!"

"That's where yuh're wrong!" said a voice from the half open front door. Chuck Russell stepped into the room. "I've heard yuh, Crane, and I understand a heap I didn't up to now. That Wayne Morgan feller shore was smart when he had Brackton fire me so's I could get a job on this spread. Wouldn't tell us why he suspected yuh—but he was right!"

The sandy-haired young waddy had his hand on the butt of his gun, his eyes held steadily on Breeze Crane and on Murdock who had whirled as he heard Russell's voice. Murdock was in front of the Circle C owner.

Behind him, Breeze Crane's scarred hand flashed to his holster. He fired before the big sheepman could turn, the bullet plowing through Murdock's back and into his heart. John Murdock crumpled and fell to the floor. No longer need he worry about another five thousand dollars—or anything else in this life.

"Take yore hand away from that holster, Russell!" snapped Breeze Crane as his gun swung up to cover the waddy whose gun hand had unconsciously lowered at the suddenness of brutal tragedy. "Yuh were a fool to come bustin' in here thataway. But it give me a chance to down Murdock."

"I suppose I'm next." Stark hate was in Chuck Russell's eyes as he glared at the big, dark-haired rancher. "So *you're* to blame for the drygulchin'—the murderin' of sheepmen and cattlemen both!"

"Yuh're right, Chuck." Crane's voice was an insolent drawl, as if he enjoyed playing cat and mouse with the waddy. "But yuh'll never tell anyone about it, 'cause I'm gonna kill yuh. When folks ask about it I'll tell 'em you and Murdock shot it out here and yuh was both killed."

"Nobody'll believe yuh!"

Chuck Russell realized that the longer he could keep Breeze Crane talking the longer he might live. Something might happen—anything!—and the young waddy desperately wanted to live. For an instant a flash of Lucy Brackton's face blurred his vision, a swift pang at the thought of all her love meant to him—then all he could see was the menacing gun in Breeze Crane's hand.

"They'll believe me," snarled Crane. "I'll drive Brackton and all the rest of the sheep and cattlemen out of the Big Hills country. They'll sell me

their land all right when things get too bad for 'em here, and then I can prove to the railroad that those deeds I forged on all the land around here are all right. This whole country will be mine then!"

THERE was a wild glitter in Breeze Crane's eyes.

He did not even appear to realize that he had been defeated, that all of the men who had been his tools and hired murderers were dead. Breeze Crane still talked of going through with his plans—the babbling of a madman.

"How can they believe yuh?" Russell demanded. "What about the Masked Rider? Don't yuh think that hombre is smart enough to have learned what this is all about?"

"Bah! I'll kill the Masked Rider, and I'll get that railroad detective Morgan, too!" Breeze Crane laughed wildly. "I'll get 'em! And now I'm tired of you, Chuck Russell. I've hated yuh a long time, hated yuh 'cause Lucy Brackton loves yuh. She never even knew I've been interested in her, but I have. That's why I was so willin' to hire you—so's I could laugh at yuh. When I drive everyone else out of the valley Lucy'll stay here with me!"

"That's a lie!" shouted Russell, careless of danger now. "Lucy wouldn't even look at you if yuh was the last man on earth!"

With a snarl Breeze Crane raised the gun in his hand. The barrel was aimed at Chuck Russell's heart. The young waddy heard the click as the hammer was cocked.

Then from the door a gun roared. An expression of surprise and pain swept over Breeze Crane's face as a bullet caught him in the right wrist. The Colt in his hand dropped to the floor—unfired. He mouthed a bitter curse as he gazed at the tall black-clad figure that stepped into the room, a smoking .45 in his hand.

"The game's up, Crane," the Masked Rider said grimly. "Figgered you was back of all the trouble in the Big Hills country, but had to make certain. That's why I followed Murdock here tonight, but I was shore he was headin' for this spread."

"Yuh can't prove anything against me!" snarled Crane as he held tightly to his wounded arm. "Not a thing!" He laughed harshly. "I'll still clean you and the rest outa this valley!"

The Masked Rider, too, saw plainly then that something had snapped in the mind of the owner of the Circle C, and he frowned. Crane had been clever, making it look as if Murdock and the rest of the sheepmen and even the Government were making things difficult in the Big Hills country, but the slips he had made had revealed him as the man behind the whole thing—if it could be proved.

Unfortunately, it had been impossible for the keen-brained outlaw to tell of those discoveries to the sheepmen and cattlemen without revealing his double identity as Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider. Now he had his man, though, even if it did seem too late, and that he had corralled an insane man.

"Get a rope, Chuck," he said. "Hurry up. I'll keep him covered!"

THE young waddy rushed out and quickly returned with a rope. At the Masked Rider's instructions he tied Crane's arms behind his back. The ranch owner did not resist.

"Take him to the Bar B," the Masked Rider said. "They'll all figger out what's best to be done with him there. Shore Crane was back of all the trouble around here. Yuh heard him say why yoreself, Chuck—because he sold all of the land to the railroad, didn't own it and had to cover up by gettin' the real ranch owners out of this part of the country so's he would have clear title."

"Yeah, I know that now." Russell nodded soberly. "Yuh'll come back to the Bar B with me?"

"No. My work's through in the valley now. I gotta be ridin' on." The

Masked Rider paused a moment, a far-away look in the eyes behind the mask. "Jim Carew will be able to produce the evidence needed to convict Crane. Carew's the real undercover man for the railroad. Morgan was jest a wandering waddy, like he said. Met up with him this afternoon. He was headin' out of this part of the country—goin' south where it's warm."

"Sorry to hear he's gone," said Russell. "I liked that jasper."

"Better get Crane out of here," urged the Masked Rider. "The men of his outfit might make trouble for yuh if they see yuh takin' him away a prisoner without knowin' what it's all about."

"I ain't worryin' about that," Russell said. "Bunkhouse is too far away for 'em to a' heard the shootin'."

Nevertheless they hurriedly sneaked Breeze Crane out of the house and set him on Murdock's horse. The Masked Rider stood guard while Russell got his own horse from the stable. Then the young waddy started for the Bar B, leading his prisoner's mount.

"Adios, amigo!" called the black-clad horseman as he swung into the saddle. "Tell Miss Jenny, Lucy and Brackton the Masked Rider said good-by and good luck."

"Right!" called back Chuck Russell. "And the whole Big Hills country is thankin' yuh."

* * * * *

"How did you know that Crane was the man who was making all of the trouble, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

The two wanderers of the dim trails were spending the remainder of the night in Jim Carew's cabin.

"Well," the Masked Rider set out to explain in detail to his Indian companion, as was always the case after such affairs as they had just experienced, "in the first place I got suspicious while I was at the Bar B. Crane arrived sayin' there was trouble at Shelter Canyon. Brackton and Russell started rushin' out as soon as they heard that. I noticed that Crane kept back of the other two men, jest as if he was expectin' somebody to fire from outside. So I kinda wondered if he hadn't known those two drygulchers were there."

"Then he brought those men with him, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Shore he did. They was supposed to down Brackton and Chuck Russell—but they didn't do it. I got them instead. When we went outside Crane told us to hurry and get our hosses. Said he'd examine the dead men hisself—and he did. And told us they were sheepmen. Nobody else got a good look at them hombres, but I was thinkin' they were right good shots for sheepmen, and I was right. Crane musta sent some of his men around to get the bodies before anyone could be shore jest what them fellers looked like."

"What else, Senor?"

"When I was ridin' with Crane and we met Murdock, Crane was mighty quick to get nasty with the leader of the sheepmen. Looked to me as though Crane was afraid Murdock might say somethin'. Then when Murdock knocked Crane out of the saddle with one blow, and not a powerful one at that, I was suspicious."

"Maybe Crane hoped that Murdock would get a chance to kill you, Senor," said Blue Hawk.

"Of course he did. When I licked Murdock and finally left Crane, then Crane musta rode away from his men, circled around and tried to drygulch me. I thought he was the hombre I saw ridin' away. It was a big man I saw, and ridin' what looked like Crane's bay hoss. Later when somebody tried to get Brackton through the window and Miss Jenny saved him, I saw it was a scarred hand that held the gun. Breeze Crane is the only man I had seen around here with a scarred hand."

"Why did the sheriff try to drygulch the four of you when you found dead cattle in the canyon?" the Yaqui prodded him.

"Sheriff was tryin' to get Brackton and whoever else he could, since he

knew the Government notices had failed. He knew somebody had the other part of that letter the Government sent him, but mebbe he didn't know it was Crane, since he didn't even know he was workin' for Crane—thought he was workin' for Murdock. Anyway he knew he was due to be found out—and didn't mean to be. He was crooked, and he was desperate. The sheriff wanted to kill Brackton—and Crane, too, I guess. Everybody he thought might know or come to know about his crookedness — and could tell the Government about him. But Crane was pretty quick to shoot Alton before he could talk.

"It was Crane who dropped the letter at the spot where I fought Murdock—not Murdock, though at first I thought it was. Musta slipped out of Crane's pocket when Murdock knocked him off his hoss."

"Those men we met along the river bank must have been guards left there by Crane to kill any of the waddies who came along," said Blue Hawk. "Don't you think so, Senor?"

"Shore. And the riders that was firin' from the north bank when the Bar B outfit was trapped was Crane's men, too. They jest rode off, fired a few shots and come back with Crane leadin' 'em. Crane musta got pretty desperate when he got so low as to send his raiders to try and kill the women at the Bar B so's that would drive Gage Brackton out of the country if nothin' else would. He had to get the Bar B somehow—'cause then it would be easy to drive the little outfits out after the big one was licked."

"And Crane did all of this because he sold property to railroad that he didn't own," said the Yaqui soberly.

"That's it. And when his first plan of driving out the ranchers by the fake Government orders failed he had Murdock and the raiders start—and hell shore broke loose." The outlaw whose Robin Hood work in one more vicinity was finished, yawned. "Guess I'll turn in. We'll be ridin' come mornin', Hawk. Our work is done in the Big Hills country."

"*Si,* Senor." Blue Hawk nodded sleepily. "Blue Hawk will be glad. I do not like this cold country."

There was silence in the cabin back in the mountains as the two men rolled up in their blankets and went to sleep. Tomorrow they would be gone. Somewhere in the wild and rugged land through which they traveled there were others who needed the aid of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk and they would be there.

Next Issue: THE MASKED RIDER in WARRIOR RANGE

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Author of "Painted Post Painkiller," "Colts for the Law," etc.

The law officer pitched on his face

UNTIL he met Sheriff Prouty, Sonny Horton couldn't remember how long it had been since a man had spoken a kind word to him.

He was a gangling lad, just turned sixteen, this button. Clad in nondescript, cast-off clothing of range riders, his chestnut thatch sunburnt to a dried straw color, nevertheless, Sonny Horton had wide, frank blue eyes and an appealing sort of smile. He looked like a stray pup anxious to make friends but ready to tuck his tail between his legs and run at the first harsh word.

He bent over the huge oaken horse tub in front of King's Mercantile Emporium, and drank with the wary alertness of a wild animal stealing something. In spite of his cagyness he did not see or hear the man crossing the street behind him until a boot landed against his rear section and plunged him headlong into the tub. When he came scrambling out, gasping for air, he heard a shout of coarse laughter.

He found himself facing a tall man in slick chaps, a fellow with a lean, cruel face and black eyes. Two guns were slung at the man's hips, and there was the air of an insolent bully about him.

"King'll charge yuh two-bits for the bath, kid," roared the bully. "Yuh've done polluted bronc drinkin' water."

Smarting from the pain of the kick, his eyes filling with tears, young Horton began backing away. A man stepped out of the store and took in the situation with a glance. Instantly his right hand flashed down and up with his six-shooter.

"Hold it, Scully!" His voice cracked out like a whip.

The laughing bully whirled like a shot. His darting hands froze as he saw the other's gun. He sobered quickly, and flame stabbed from his black eyes.

"Oh, so it's you, Prouty" he snarled.

"Yep—me." The sheriff nodded. "How come yuh're pickin' on buttons now? Can't find any men to stand up to yuh?"

"Damn yuh, Prouty!" "Ace" Scully roared wrathfully. "Yuh'll lock horns with me once too often. Can't a feller have any hossplay without you buttin' in? I wasn't harmin' the kid tramp none."

"Scatter" said the sheriff grimly. "Fork yore cayuse and leave town. Yuh're a troublemaker, Scully. I don't wanta have to warn yuh again."

BESTOWING a villainous look on the innocent cause of his discomfiture, Ace Scully marched across the street to the saloon. Sheriff Prouty stood there, gun in hand, watching him until he disappeared. Then he holstered his weapon and turned kindly gray eyes on the boy.

"What's yore name, lad?" he asked. "Where yuh from? Yuh're a stranger in Sand Springs, ain't yuh?"

Sonny Horton surveyed the sheriff with grave eyes, a kindly-faced man in black stetson and black Prince Albert. There was a shiny star on the man's vest. Something about him inspired the boy's confidence.

"Y-yes, sir," he faltered. "But I ain't a tramp. My name's Sonny Horton, from over Arizona way. I-I'm lookin' for a job. I been doin' all kinds of odd jobs since—since my pa got drygulched. I make a fair ranch hand."

"Yore dad got drygulched?" repeated Prouty. "Horton — Horton. Not Sam Horton of Fire Rock?"

"Yes, sir. Did you know him?"

"I knew him. And his murderer was never found."

"But when I get a little older, I'm gonna start lookin' for the dirty skunk," promised young Horton fiercely. "I'll know 'im. He stole Pa's gold watch. He wasn't quite dead when I found him. He told me his killer had a black mole on his left wrist. He seen it when the skunk took his watch."

"Well, well," murmured the sheriff sympathetically. "So yuh've been driftin' ever since then?"

"But I ain't no tramp," repeated Sonny Horton stoutly. "I work for everything I get."

"I don't blame yuh, son," Prouty nodded. "Come along with me. We'll see if we can't fix yuh up with some sort of job temporary. Yuh look like a good meal wouldn't hurt yuh none."

As the lad and the sheriff started away, a bystander spoke up.

"Yuh shouldn't of butted in on Scully, Prouty. He's a tough hombre."

"I ain't tender myself," said the sheriff shortly. "I'm tired of these range rannies tryin' to run Sand Springs every time they come to town."

He led Sonny Horton to the restaurant.

"Mabel, here's a shorthorn friend of mine," he said to the buxom, smiling waitress. "Fill him up and charge it to me. Then send him up to my office, will yuh?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar I will, Tom Prouty," the woman answered.

Half an hour later Sonny Horton put in his appearance at the sheriff's office.

"Well!" The official looked up with a friendly smile. "Yuh look like yuh've growed an inch already."

"I reckon I did." Sonny grinned. "Mebbe four inches around the belly. Now I want to work to pay for what I ate."

Sheriff Prouty frowned thoughtfully.

"I been thinkin' about yuh, Sonny. They ain't nothin' in the sheriffin' line that you can do, but I got a friend that runs the livery barn, and I figger he can use a good ranch hand to help tend to the hosses."

"But—but I'd rather work for you, Mr. Prouty," declared the lad quickly. "I'd rather clean spittoons for you than curry the finest hoss in New Mexico."

Sonny Horton had found a hero, and he wanted to freeze onto him. Sheriff Prouty, however, thought differently.

"Mebbe some day, Sonny, we can get together. Right now, yuh're kinda small for a man's job. Let's go see Tim Burke."

"Jest lemme do yore dirty work," protested the boy. "And I can grow."

"There'll be plenty of dirty work when yuh have growed," said Prouty grimly. "C'mon."

ALMOST in tears, Sonny Horton trailed along with his new friend. He was silent as they drew near the scene of his involuntary bath. Such humiliations burn deep in the heart of a sixteen-year-old boy.

It was high noon, and scorchingly hot. The wooden awning in front of the general store cast a deep shade that was grateful. Even the sheriff lagged in its shelter, and Sonny tarried to look at the hardware display in one dingy window.

Suddenly the batwing doors of the saloon across the street flapped open, and Ace Scully dashed out into the dazzling sunlight.

"Prouty!" yelled the bully. "Yuh tinhorn sheriff, mebbe yuh ain't so proddy without yore hardware in yore hand. So I'm gonna tell yuh what a low-down, ornery, sneakin' badge-toter yuh—"

Sheriff Prouty halted—hands held carefully away from his sides.

"I told yuh to leave town, Scully," he cut the ranting bully off. "So rattle yore—"

Ace Scully slapped at his holsters without warning. His guns began flaming before the sheriff could get his own six-shooter clear of its holster. The law officer uttered a grunt, began folding at the knees, and pitched on his face out into the street right beside the tub which had witnessed Sonny Horton's humiliation.

As the lad saw his only friend topple, he let out a choking cry and, heedless of possible bullets, he ran to the side of his fallen champion.

"Damn! Oh, damn!" he cried as he bent over the stricken sheriff.

That the kindly officer was not mortally wounded, being shot high in the shoulder, young Horton did not see.

Swift as a striking hawk, the lad grabbed the fallen sheriff's six-shooter and came up with it in his lean young fist. Straight toward the killer he charged, sobbing and cursing.

The attack was so utterly insane that Ace Scully gaped in astonishment. Then, realizing his danger, he pulled trigger hastily. His lead fairly hailed around the grief-maddened youth, but failed to find a mark. And then, just as the villain snapped out of his panic, Sonny Horton let go with one shot.

The weapon bucked like a crazy bronc in his young hand. But the wonder of it all was the look of bewilderment on the face of Ace Scully. The bully staggered back a couple of paces as his guns sagged. Then he attempted to bring them up, failed, crumpled at the knees, and pitched forward on his face.

By the time a crowd reached the spot, Sonny Horton was staring at a black mole on the unconscious bully's left wrist.

"Scully!" he sobbed hysterically. "This feller! He's the skunk that drygulched my dad!"

"He shore is," said Sheriff Prouty a little later, after the doctor had patched up his shoulder. "Yuh shot him plumb center, Sonny, and knocked his wind clean outa him. Nope, yuh didn't kill him. But yuh played hell with the works of that heavy old gold watch yore daddy used to own. Scully will live to hang."

"I'm sorry," said Sonny Horton. "About the watch, I mean. I meant to kill him for shootin' you, Mr. Prouty. I reckon I'd better go hunt up that livery job. I can't do much with a six-shooter yet."

"I reckon yuh'd better hush yore trap," said the sheriff. "Yuh're dang near man size already, button. And I figger yuh can finish yore growin' in my office."

CALICO CATTLE

Calloway leaped forward and swung his gun at the head of Alf Stadden

The Lanky Stranger Horns Right in on the Ranch Racket of the Stadden Brothers and Writes His Name in Gunsmoke!

By CLAUDE RISTER

Author of "Four-legged Fury," "Outlaw Romance," etc.

PETE CALLOWAY stepped into the tough pool room, spread his long, bowed legs, pushed back his worn Stetson and began making a cigarette.

Pool balls ceased to kiss. Patrons became wooden images—froze in various attitudes. A hush clutched the place, for the Stadden brothers and their ex-convict foreman were there, and those three hard men had just been making war-talk about the tall waddy.

The lanky young newcomer licked his cigarette and then inquired of the rack-man: "Where 'bouts will I find the Stadden brothers? I understand they were seen comin' into this place while ago."

Husky Alf Stadden's big jaws went hard. Tall, slim Stadden's dark face flushed. Ates Mordson's thin lips flattened across his yellow fangs. The foreman was a tough and eely hombre, and as suspicious as a wolf by nature.

The three men got up and slowly approached Pete Calloway. Big Alf Stadden's tawny eyes were hot in his beefy face.

"Here we are, fella," he growled, "and yuh don't have to state what it is yuh want to talk with us about. We tabbed yuh for a law-spy the minute we saw you snoopin' about our spread. Now get this, hombre, and let 'er sink in good and deep. We're sick and tired of being suspected and accused of rustlin'. The law has investigated us plenty but never got nothin' on us. The next time we catch you or any other snooper prowlin' about our range we're going to chunk some lead at him. Savvy?"

Pete Calloway smiled lazily.

"Keep yore Levis on, Stadden," he advised. "Yuh've got me all wrong. I ain't a cow detective, and I'm not suspectin' you of anything. What I'm interested in is that little dab of range down on the creek. Yuh know—that rundown cabin, with the crib and the corral. I'd like to buy 'em from yuh if the price and the terms are right."

Lanky, horse-faced Ates Mordson blinked. The Staddens looked at each other dumbly. The crowd gazed in an incredulous way. Three times already had the Stadden brothers sold that little place on the creek, and each buyer later had sold back for a song after being just about cleaned out of cattle.

The law never had been able to get anything on Alf and Sid, and their ex-convict foreman, but every one knew they were guilty, and—well, it just seemed unbelievable that any one would be silly enough to buy the little spread now. Evidently this fool ranny from parts unknown hadn't inquired into the character of the outfit.

Dark, slim, suave, Sid Stadden was first to regain his wits. He smiled and apologized for haste. Then:

"So yuh're interested in the little Calf Creek place. Well! Let's go across the street to the saloon. Mike has a private room where we can talk the matter over."

Calloway nodded and led the way.

THE deal was quickly consummated. The Staddens made a dirt cheap price, for they figured on getting the place back, anyway—after stealing whatever cattle this lanky cowpoke brought in.

Later Sid Stadden, shrewder of the two brothers, wagged his head. "Yuh know, Alf," he said, "I'm a little uneasy about this deal. It was too much like havin' nice, ripe peaches drop right into yore hands."

"But what could be wrong?" questioned Alf. "He paid, didn't he? And you can bet yore boots that lawyer, Sam Myerson, made out the papers exactly right."

"Maybe the waddy never heard the scandal about that place," drawled Mordson, grinning evilly.

"Or maybe," Alf supplied grimly, "he did hear, but is hard-headed enough to think that he can buck us."

"In which case he's due for some education," Sid stated flatly. And then on afterthought: "I wonder if he's a gunner. Um-m, I wonder!"

He rubbed his right palm up and down his thigh. Sid was considerable of a leadslinger himself, not to mention his brother and their jail-buzzard foreman.

Sheriff Nathan met Pete Calloway on the street and stopped him.

"I understand yuh're interested in the Staddens' Calf Creek place. I con-

sider it my duty to warn yuh that they're suspected of breakin' three other fellers out there, stealin' their cattle and—"

"Yeah, I know," Calloway acknowledged with a lazy grin. "I heard all about that, but they won't steal my cows."

"No? And why not?" grunted the sheriff.

"Jest because they can't get away with it." And with that somewhat mysterious statement, the new owner of the Calf Creek spread went on his way.

The still suspicious Sid Stadden sought him out before he left town.

"Calloway, just what do you intend doing out there?" he asked. "Because if it's plowing under good range or running sheep—"

"Perish the thoughts, Stadden. I'm going to run cows," Calloway told him gravely.

Sid's fears were somewhat eased.

Then came the day when Pete Calloway brought in his breeder stock. Men who had gone to the pens to see the stuff unloaded stared in amazement, for these were not range cattle. They were Holsteins.

"Calico cows!" ejaculated astounded Alf Stadden. "What the heck?"

Calloway smiled serenely as he replied.

"Yeah, there's real money in this kind of stuff. Three times as much per head as yuh'd get for a beef. And the nice part of it is they bring just as much poor as if they were fat. Nicer still, nobody would dare rustle 'em, because they're too conspicuous. He couldn't get away with it—mixing 'em with his range stuff."

LATER Sid Stadden snarled at his brother Alf and the foreman.

"Yuh see? I told yuh he had an ace up his sleeve. He's right, we wouldn't dare steal them calico cows. And to think, we sold that place cheap."

"Don't worry, the jigger won't make a go of it, and he'll be ready to sell out for a song within two-three years," prophesied Mordson.

Others were of the same opinion.

"If it could be done, it would've been done," argued a grizzled old-timer. "Somebody would've had the same idee and tried it."

"Which they have," informed Calloway. "While travelin' with a rodeo outfit I saw plenty of dairy cow-raisin' goin' on near the big towns. I'll make more money than such fellows do, though, for I won't have to do any feedin'."

"Yeah," growled the old-timer, "and I suppose next yuh'll be tellin' us yuh aim to start a dairy."

"Maybe, why not? The people of this town would likely appreciate gettin' fresh milk and butter daily."

The other snorted in disdain.

That night Sid Stadden paced the living room floor of the Rocker S, smoking cigarette after cigarette, using his cunning brain. He went into his bedroom, took a copy of the sales agreement from a trunk and studied it. Suddenly then his black eyes sparkled.

"I wonder?" he asked himself. High heels cracking, he strode back into the living room. "Alf," he said, "come on, we're going to see Calloway. I want to have a peek at his original of that sales contract."

"Huh? How come?"

Sid explained, and slowly a grin broke over Alf's big face.

"Bud," he complimented, "yuh've got a brain in that noggin of yores."

They took Ates Mordson into their confidence. A short time later the three men rode away toward the little Calf Creek ranch.

Mordson hid his bronc in the bushes and stole to the house on foot. He stationed himself at a window. Then Sid and Alf rode right up to the cabin. Calloway came to the door with a lamp.

Sid demanded payment of a sum of money. Pete Calloway expressed surprise and said no such sum was due. Sid demanded to see the contract. Wary, a little puzzled, the lanky cowboy brought it. Sid glanced at it, then he and Alf departed, grumbling.

As Pete Calloway watched them ride into the night he scratched his lantern jaw and muttered.

"I smell polecat. Wonder what them buzzards really had on their minds."

Wagging his head in perplexity, he turned back indoors. Ignorant of the fact that he was being watched, he put the contract away.

A short time later a pounding of hoofs brought him out of his chair and sent him rushing onto the front porch. His saddle pony was galloping around inside the corral, and snorting. He glimpsed a man, moving about and dragging a lariat.

"The nerve!" growled Calloway. "He must know I'd hear that noise!"

HE ran indoors, grabbed his Winchester, and went high heeling it for the corral. Half-way there he stopped abruptly and hunkered on spurred heels. A six-gun had popped and a bullet had winged viciously past his head.

Again flame spurted between two rails of the fence. Another bullet zipping past. He swung the rifle to his shoulder and fired, heard the impact of lead striking wood.

Twice more the Winchester cracked; twice more the six-gun popped. The supposed horse thief was changing position following each shot. Pete Calloway rose and charged, running a zigzag course.

A sudden thunder of hoofs! The night raider was fleeing, keeping the corral between himself and the rushing cowboy. The young rancher circled the rear of the barn, saw the shadowy form of a horseman just fading into the darkness. His rifle spoke again. Its flame blinded him for an instant, and when his vision cleared the culprit was gone.

He went into the corral and quieted his pony. Then he climbed atop the pole fence, rolled and smoked a cigarette the while he pondered.

"The Staddens don't dare steal my cows, so they figure to steal my ponies, huh?" he muttered. "Yessir, that fella sure had his nerve, stayin' on and still tryin' to rope Tony after creatin' all that rumpus."

He returned to the house and went to bed, unaware that as he entered the front door a man sneaked out by way of the back one.

People watched Pete Calloway's experiment with deep interest, unwilling for the most part to believe he could succeed. The seasons rolled by, and one day he showed them. A buyer came from Denver, and their eyes popped when they heard the price the Calf Creek man received for his stuff.

And then the tricky, crooked Staddens, who had been waiting and watching to see if there really were any money in "pinto" cattle, showed their dirty cards.

That evil triumverate, Alf Stadden, Sid Stadden, and Ates Mordson, went to Calloway in a body. Smooth Sid Stadden did the talking.

"Bud and I have decided to exercise our option, Calloway, so if yuh'll come along with us to see Sam Myerson, that lawman will fix the papers up."

"What option?" frowned Calloway in mild wonder.

"Why, the option to buy back the place at the price yuh paid, plus yore cattle at current market prices for beef."

Pete Calloway was astounded.

"Wha-at? Are you loco? I didn't make any such agreement as that! Current beef prices? Why, shucks, man, them spotted cows and heifers are worth a hundred and fifty dollars apiece."

(Continued on Page 104)

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(Continued from Page 103)

Ates Mordson's right hand moved a little closer to his gun-butt. Alf Stadden eased aside—shooting leeway. Sid smiled acidly and explained.

"Yuh evidently didn't study the papers before signin'. Here, take a look at this."

He drew out his copy of the sales agreement, ran the tip of a slim gun-finger along lines that read:

It is further understood and agreed that parties of the first part have the option of buying back said ranch property if they so choose, at any time, for the same price as paid by party of the second part. Also the option of buying all cattle on said ranch, at current market prices for beef on the hoof.

Pete Calloway stared hard at the paper, then at the three men. He was stunned. Queer, he hadn't noticed that stipulation when he had studied the contract. He gulped his Adam's apple.

"It's a dirty trick. It ain't a true copy of the agreement I signed," he stated.

The three crooks laid hands on guns. That tall waddy might go into a wild rage at any instant. Sid Stadden challenged sneeringly.

"Yuh're just tryin' to crawl out of a deal, cowboy. Take a look at the original yuh hold, and yuh'll find it reads the same."

Calloway glared for another moment, his eyes cold.

"I'll do just that little thing," he assured them.

He fairly scorched horseshoes getting back to his small ranch. He threw open a trunk lid, tore into some papers. With mingled emotions he read the lines of that option agreement.

FOR a while he sat staring at the floor, the paper in one hand. Then he tossed it aside, absently rolled and lighted a cigarette. Had he been that dumb? Had he really passed up that important paragraph on the day of the deal?

Then he recalled the visit of the Staddens and their foreman two years before. He had always wondered about that call. He remembered, too, that somebody ostensibly had tried to steal his Tony horse shortly thereafter, had created much noise in so doing. Had it been merely a trick to get him out of the house, so that the contract could be stolen?

He took the typewritten agreement and studied it critically. That page on which the option was written, to his keen eyes seemed just a little fresher than the others. Next he looked at the clips which held the sheets together, also at the blue cover.

"If she hasn't been taken apart, then I'm blind," he muttered.

Pete Calloway grimly serviced his six-gun and shoved it back into its holster. He went out, forked leather and hit the trail for town. He was literally burning up inside.

He found the Staddens in the town's leading saloon. It was night now. The Staddens and their foreman were at the bar. The sheriff and lawyer Sam Myerson were engaged in a game of dominoes. Pete went directly to Sid Staddens.

"Let me have another look at that copy of yore contract, hombre," he demanded without preamble.

Smiling sardonically, the man produced it. With the carelessness common to rangemen in the handling of "papers," Pete had neglected to have his original of the agreement recorded. He saw that this copy had been registered.

His eyes were bleak when they rose to Sid's darkly handsome face.

"I notice that this here paper was recorded on the day following that call you two jaspers made on me a couple of years ago."

"Yeah," Sid nodded. "We saw yuh hadn't recorded yores, so we figured we'd better take care of that end our-

(Continued on Page 106)

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"I have sold, up to date, nineteen features to the Detroit Free Press and have been made their correspondent here," writes Mrs. Leonard Sanders of 218 Union St., Milford, Mich., on completing the N. I. A. course. Her skilful handling of feature stories was the reason given by the editor for her appointment. Mrs. Sanders' first feature was sold less than four months after she enrolled with N. I. A.

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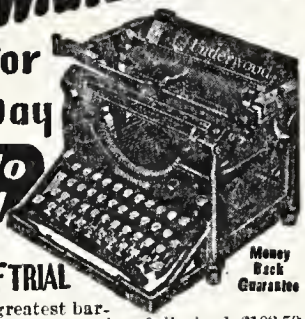

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(Continued from Page 105)

selves—so yuh couldn't crawl out later, if we took a notion to deal."

Calloway's right hand tensed above the butt of his old forty-five. His better sense told him that he wouldn't have a chance in the world in a shoot-out with those three tough lead slingers, but he was determined to cut loose against them, anyway. But the next instant a hand fell on his shoulder.

He turned his head, looked into the face of Sheriff Nathan.

"I've heard about the controversy between you parties," the sheriff said, "and I've been waitin' to see how she worked out. Now we ain't gonna have any gunplay around here. Savvy that? Incidentally, I checked Sid's copy with the record book, and I found that she jibed. So, cowboy, it looks like yuh ain't got any case at all. For once, the Staddens are right."

"The coyotes stole my original," Calloway accused in a choky sort of voice. "They got hold of a typewriter—Myerson's, maybe—and made the change. They rewrote a page, rebound the document, and the next morning had it recorded."

"He's talking crazy! Why the idea!" Stadden jeered.

The sheriff shrugged. "Yuh've no proof, I figure," he said to Pete. "However, if yuh think yuh've got a case, talk her over with Myerson. Settle the matter legal, not with guns."

CALLOWAY did talk to the attorney, heatedly, in a rush of words. Myerson nodded.

"Well, I don't know whether I did it in this particular case, but I usually keep a copy of all the papers I draw. We'll see in the morning," the lawyer said.

Startled looks flashed across the faces of the Staddens. They jerked away from the bar, exchanged glances, and then Alf blurted:

"What's that?"

"He said her plain," Calloway advised him coldly.

"Yes," said Myerson, as he shuffled the dominoes, "it would be in the files, either under S. or C. As I was saying, I'll take a look in the morning. Be around at my office—say, nine o'clock, the three of you."

"Let's go over there right now," urged the young rancher. "Get the whole thing settled."

"No rush," Myerson said calmly. "The sheriff and I have a domino game on. Anyway, I wouldn't go back to the office tonight. Nine o'clock in the morning, gentlemen."

Pete Calloway pled, but it was no use. The suave Sid Stadden agreed.

"Why, sure, Myerson, that's all right with us. No hurry. See yuh at nine manana."

Calloway finally swore in exasperation, strode out and began walking the streets. A hiss stopped him. He wheeled, right hand going instinctively to six-gun. A shadowy figure stood within an alley.

The man beckoned, and Calloway moved cautiously toward him. To his surprise, he recognized the sheriff. Nathan explained hurriedly.

"It was a trap, that talk about the third copy. Myerson hasn't any such. When we heard about the controversy between you and the Staddens, we believed yore side of it, and figured them foxy hombres was tryin' to rob you. Doggonit," he broke off, "why are range people so all fired careless in legal matters? Yuh didn't record your papers, and the Staddens didn't either until they saw a chance to cheat yuh."

"I've learned my lesson," the Calf creek man said with a wag of the head. "But yore trap? Just how does she work?"

"If the Staddens are guilty as you charge, they'll burglarize Myerson's office and look for another copy of the contract. You and I'll be waitin' and

(Continued on Page 108)

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(Continued from Page 107)

watchin' in the dark. Come on, let's hustle over there and stake out. I got Sam's key."

They hurried along in the rear of buildings, turned up an alley, halted at the edge of the sidewalk. They were directly opposite the attorney's small frame building now. Pete could dimly make out the sign across the front:

S. J. MYERSON. LAND, LAW, REAL ESTATE, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE, NOTARY PUBLIC.

The two men looked cautiously up and down the street.

"All clear," muttered the sheriff, then led the way across to the little building.

Sheriff Nathan opened the door, and they went in. The officer locked the door and pocketed the key. The shades were closely drawn, and so it was pretty safe to make a small light. Nathan struck a match, and keeping it carefully shielded in two hands, he led the way into a back room. It was here that the lawyer's files, and books were kept.

In a corner was a small closet. Sheriff Nathan opened it. Pete Calloway saw a slicker, an old overcoat, a pair of overshoes, stationery supplies. The two men squeezed into the place, closed the door and waited.

They had been there fully an hour, and were beginning to feel cramped, when there came a slight sound from the back of the building. The young ranchman nudged the officer, and Nathan nudged him back.

"They're pryin' open a window," the sheriff whispered. "Looks like yore story holds water."

Calloway's heart was beating fast, and unconsciously his right hand went to his six-shooter. This burglarizing of the lawyer's office proved the Staddens guilty, all right, as he had charged. They were coming into the trap, perhaps bringing their ex-convict foreman

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with them. When the trap was sprung they likely would fight, and those three men were hard-bitten, experienced lead slingers.

After a while the two waiters heard the window slide up. There was a faint scuffing of boots as men came over the sill, then cautious footsteps. A match struck, and sputtered.

"Here's the file-case over here," the voice of Sid Stadden said guardedly.

More footsteps, sound of the file-case opening, a rustling of papers. A soft glow of light sprang into being as Alf Stadden lit the lamp on the table.

Sheriff Nathan eased the closet door ajar. He and the cowboy peered out. Big Alf Stadden was still holding the match shielded in his Stetson, throwing its light upon the files. His heavy-jawed visage was grim. His sorrel hair stood up in a fierce bush. The tall and sneeringly handsome Sid Stadden was swiftly handling papers. Ates Mordson stood to one side, watching silently. All three villains were caught in the trap. "Filed under either S or C," Sid said.

"Well, I don't see anything that looks like—"

"He wasn't shore he had one, yuh know," Alf growled softly. "But make danged sure. If there is a third copy, and it gets into that cowboy's hands, our hash is just about cooked."

Ates Mordson now put in: "Right shrewd of that jigger to figure out we raided this office before—to rewrite that second page on the same typewriter. But we had him when we slipped his copy back into his cabin while he was out."

"Make danged sure," Alf cautioned his brother again.

Once more Sheriff Nathan elbowed Pete Calloway. The young man glanced at the other's face. The officer nodded; then pushed the door wide open. Softly he and the tall cowboy stepped out of the closet.

(Continued on Page 110)

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(Continued from Page 109)

"Lift 'em, men!" snapped the sheriff.

The three burglars stiffened, swiveled their heads to look at the two shadowy figures. The sheriff went on.

"I'm arresting yuh for burglary, theft, fraud—"

He got no further. Alf Stadden's big right hand grabbed for his hip. The next instant the room was being jarred by gun thunder.

Pete Calloway's first shot was directed at the place where Sid stood, but that lithe gunman leaped aside with the quickness of a startled cat. The waddy heard his lead rap sharply against the steel filing case. He leaped forward and swung his gun at the head of Alf Stadden in time to save the sheriff's life. Big Alf went over backward, knocking the lamp from the table and plunging the room into darkness.

Muzzle flame streaked and flared. Boot soles shuffled swiftly as men changed positions. Spurs rang sharply. And that infernal pounding of six-shooters went on!

Calloway felt a bullet slip through the crown of his hat. Another plucked at his neckscarf. He fired at a flitting shadow. The man went down, and the cowboy knew by the heavy impact of the body that he had dropped burly Alf Stadden for good this time.

SID STADDEN began cursing like a wildman. Fiercely he rushed Calloway, shooting as he came. A hot slug drew a streak of pain across the rancher's ribs. At that very same instant Sid lurched to a stop as the sheriff sent a bullet into him. The tall, slim form stood swaying.

Pete Calloway squatted on spurred heels just in time to escape a shot from Ates Mordson. This one, too, went through his hat. His own Colt roared. Mordson's weapon fell from his hand and thudded to the floor. He went staggering backward, brought up hard

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against a wall, slid down to the floor. He squirmed over onto one cheek, then lay still.

It was all over. The air reeked of gunsmoke. The quiet there within the room was almost weird in contrast to the terrible din of a moment before. But out on the street there was a growing buzz of excitement as men, headed by Lawyer Myerson, rushed to investigate the shooting.

The sheriff lighted a second lamp, and then he and Pete Calloway looked at the shambles. Walls and office furniture were bullet-scarred. The officer had a split cheek, and the wound was streaming blood freely. There was another bloodstain on his left thigh, and he limped slightly as he moved about, examining the three fallen burglars.

"You hurt, son?" he called over one shoulder.

"Nothing serious," Calloway answered. "Just a rake across the ribs, sheriff."

"I'm jest bullet-branded, too. Um-m — Alf dead, Sid dead, Mordson wounded. That cleans up a snaky gang I been tryin' a long time to get the goods on, cowboy."

When Ates Mordson recovered consciousness he made a complete confession which Myerson wrote down for his signature. A short time later as Nathan and Calloway were leaving the doctor's office, the sheriff spoke to the cowboy.

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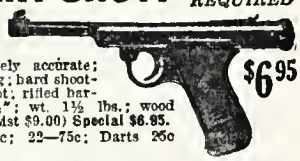

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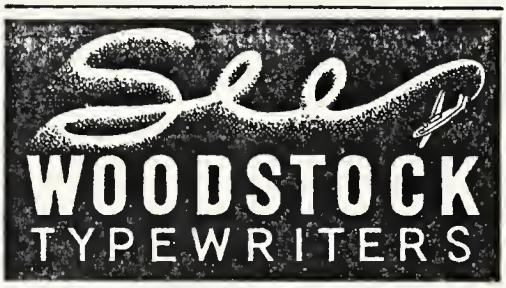

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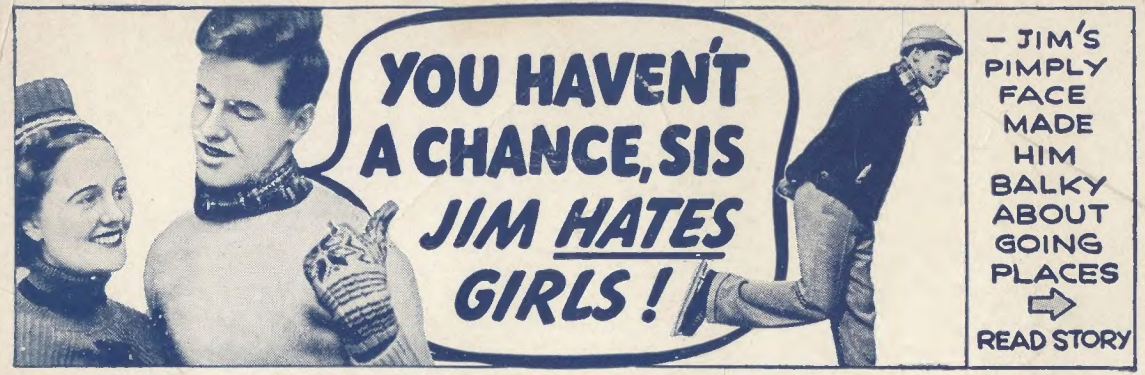

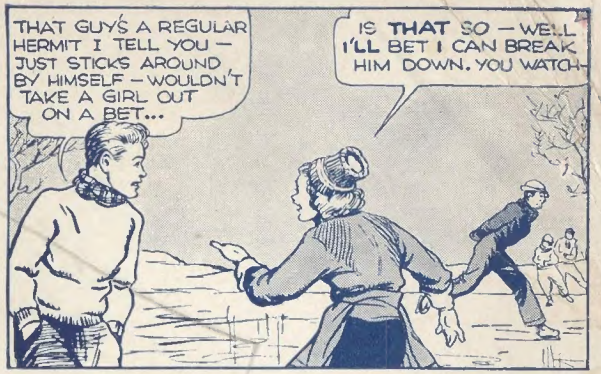
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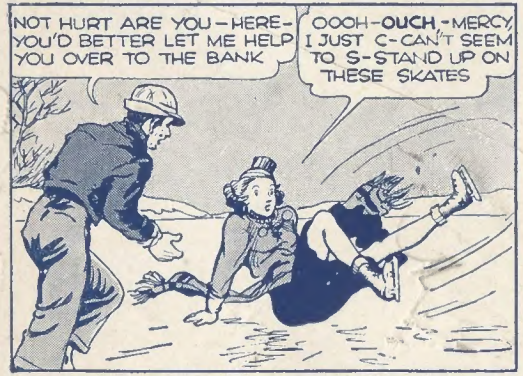
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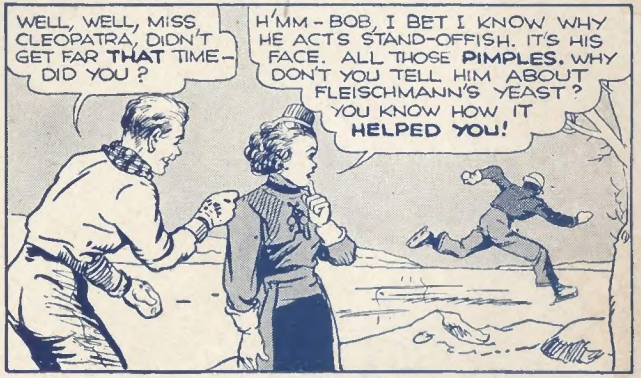
OOOH – OUCH – MERCY, I JUST C-CAN'T SEEM TO S-STAND UP ON THESE SKATES

THANKS SO MUCH – YOU'RE JIM GREENE AREN'T YOU? I'VE HEARD MY BROTHER BOB TALK ABOUT YOU LOTS. WHY DON'T YOU EVER COME OVER WITH THE REST OF THE CROWD?
OH – I – ER I COULDN'T – THAT IS YOU SEE – I'M – ER – I'M NO GO AT SOCIAL STUFF


WELL, WELL, MISS CLEOPATRA, DIDN'T GET FAR THAT TIME – DID YOU?
H'MM – BOB, I BET I KNOW WHY HE ACTS STAND-OFFISH. IT'S HIS FACE. ALL THOSE PIMPLES. WHY DON'T YOU TELL HIM ABOUT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST? YOU KNOW HOW IT HELPED YOU!

LATER
HERE – TRY THIS ONE!
WHO SAID JIM DOESN'T LIKE GIRLS?
O.K. SIS – I'LL EAT MY WORDS. YOU AND THOSE YEAST CAKES SURE HAVE WORKED WONDERS. JIM'S A NEW GUY SINCE THOSE PIMPLES LEFT HIM!

Don't let Adolescent Pimples keep YOU from making new friends

COUNTLESS boys and girls shun company and avoid "dates" because they hate to be seen with a pimply face.

After the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer—important glands develop and final growth takes place. The whole body is disturbed. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin. Pimples result.

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast is helping thousands of young people to overcome adolescent pimples. It clears these skin irritants out of the blood. As a result, the pimples go away.

Eat 3 cakes of Fleischmann's Yeast daily, one about ½ hour before each meal—plain, or in a little water—until your skin is clear. Start today.

clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Every ring or watch carries ROYAL'S written guarantee backed by 42 years of fair and square dealing. **Make your selection now — take 10 months to pay.**

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3 Genuine DIAMONDS

$2.35 a Month

LJ-1 . . . Exquisite engagement ring of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Fiery, genuine blue-white center diamond, matched diamond on each side. (Specify color gold desired.) **Only $2.35 a month.**

Both for $29.75

Only $2.87 a month

4 Genuine Diamonds

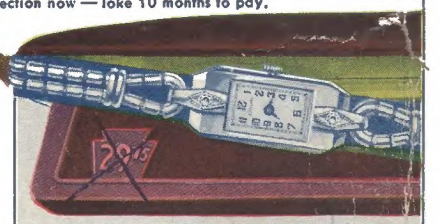
LJ-6 . . . Perfectly matched "Queen of Hearts" engagement and wedding ring ensemble of 14K Solid White or Yellow Gold. Engagement ring is set with a fiery, genuine blue-white diamond, and the wedding ring with 3 matched diamonds. Specify gold desired. **Both for only $2.87 a month.**

If purchased separately:

LJ-6A . . . Engagement Ring only . . . $19.75

LJ-6B . . . Wedding Ring only . . . $12.50

$1.00 Down — Balance 10% Monthly



2 Diamond Baguette

Only $1.87 a month

Only $19.75

LJ-9 . . . One of America's smartest Baguette wrist watches at an especially low price. Elegantly styled, modern lifetime case set with 2 genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed movement. Smart link bracelet to match. **Reduced to $19.75 — only $1.87 a month.**

$29.75

Latest 17 Jewel BULOVA

Only $2.87 a month

LJ-3 . . . BULOVA'S "Goddess of Time"! Guaranteed 17 Jewel BULOVA movement. Tiny, square case in charm and color of natural gold. Silk cord bracelet. **Only $2.87 a month.**

Only $27.50

Ladies' 7 Diamond CLUSTER RING

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LJ-2 . . . Dazzling ladies' square prong cluster ring, expertly set with seven finely matched fiery, genuine diamonds. Looks like a $450.00 solitaire. 14K Solid Yellow Gold ring. **Only $2.65 a month.**

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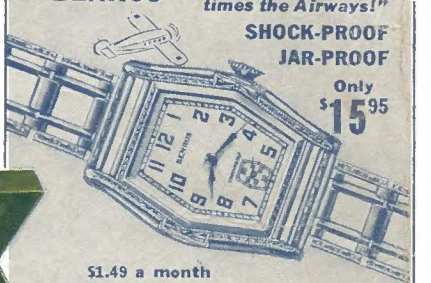
JAR-PROOF



Only $15.95

$14.50

A ROYAL SENSATION!

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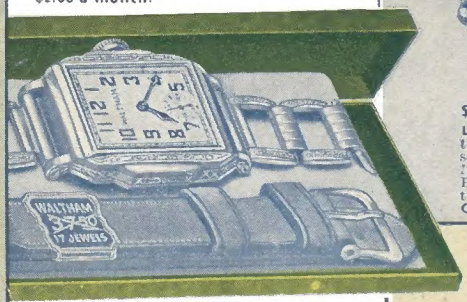
LJ-4 . . . Ladies, baguette type wrist watch in streamlined permanent white case; fully guaranteed movement. Matched bracelet. **Only $1.35 a month.**

$1.49 a month

LJ-12 . . . Nationally known BENRUS at the price of an ordinary watch! Handsomely engraved white case fitted with a fully guaranteed SHOCKPROOF, JAR-PROOF, BENRUS movement. New type triple link bracelet to match. $15.95 — **Only $1.49 a month.**



17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat"

Extra Leather Strap FREE!

$2.37 a month

Only $24.75

LJ-8 . . . Imagine this for only $2.37 a month! Factory guaranteed famous 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" at a remarkably low price. Richly engraved, permanent white case with link bracelet to match and a smart, new leather strap included FREE. Usually $37.50 — now offered complete as shown at the sensationally low price of only $24.75 — $2.37 a month.

$1.59 a month

Diamond, Initial Ring

Only $16.95

LJ-7 . . . Gentleman's initial ring, very attractively priced. 10K Solid Yellow Gold, set with a brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 Solid White Gold Initials on contrasting, genuine black Onyx. (Specify initials desired.) **Only $1.59 a month.**

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